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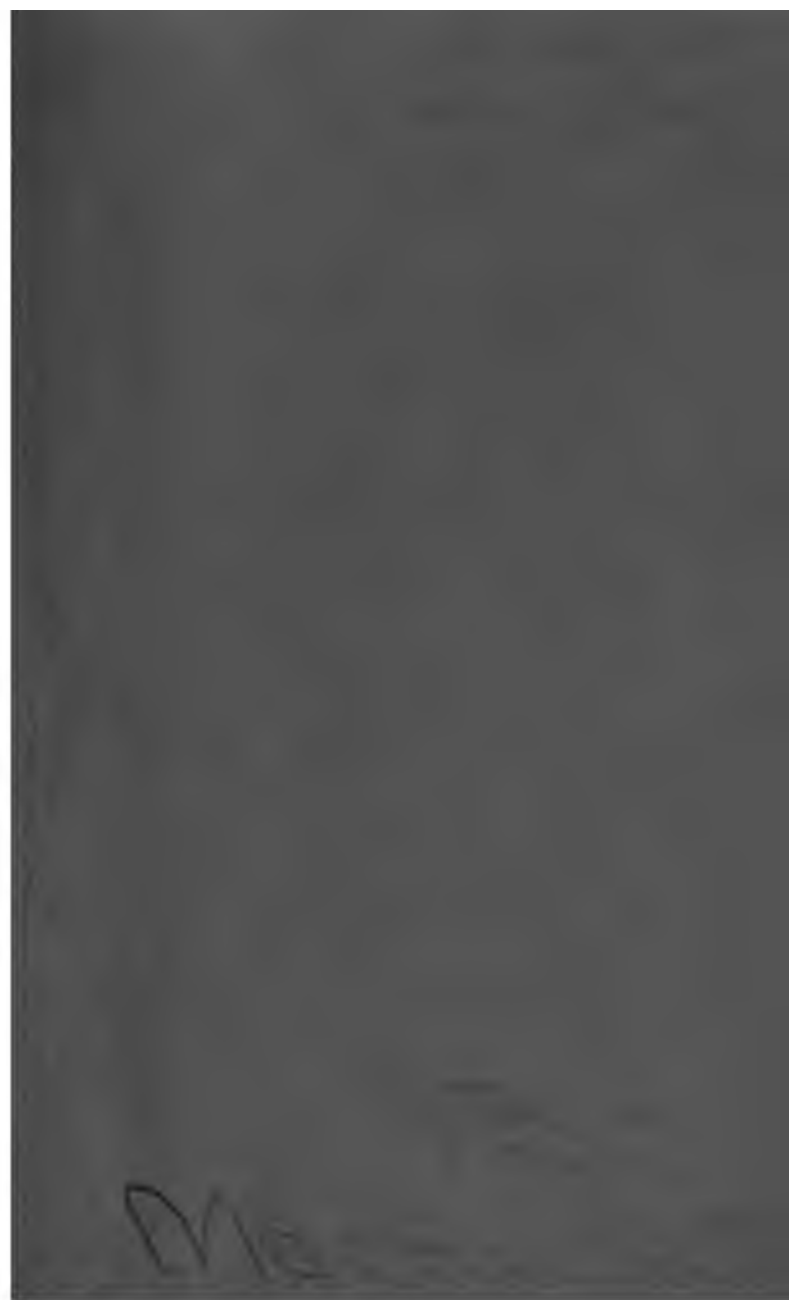
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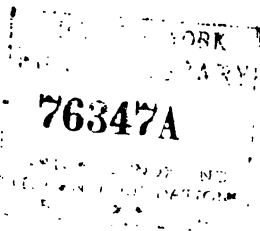
THE MARRIAGE OF SUSAN

BY
HELEN R. MARTIN



FRONTISPIECE
BY
WALTER DE MARIS

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**THE MARRIAGE
OF SUSAN**

Books by Helen R. Martin

BARNABETTA

**BETROTHAL OF ELYPHOLATE, AND OTHER TALES
OF THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH**

CROSSWAYS

GERTIE SWARTZ: FANATIC OR CHRISTIAN

HER HUSBAND'S PURSE

HIS COURTSHIP

MAGGIE OF VIRGINSBURG

MARTHA OF THE MENNONITE COUNTRY

REVOLT OF ANNE ROYLE

SABINA, STORY OF THE AMISH

THE FIGHTING DOCTOR

THE MARRIAGE OF SUSAN

THE PARASITE

THOSE FITZENBERGERS

TILLIE, A MENNONITE MAID

WHEN HALF-GODS GO

**THE MARRIAGE
OF SUSAN**

THE MARRIAGE OF SUSAN

CHAPTER I

TIME, AN OCTOBER AFTERNOON

AS SHE got off the train at Reifsville the loafers about the little station and about the General Store across the road divined, without knowing just why, that she was too "different," somehow, to be a "lady agent"; not young enough to be an applicant for the school; and too something-else-quite-indefinable to be a possible visitor to any family of the village. So what was there left for her to be? Why was she here? They did not usually have any difficulty in "sizing up" the few daily arrivals by the train.

As she walked out of the station and up the one street of the village, their sleepy eyes followed her with mild curiosity. That any "female" could be very simply dressed and yet not look poor, but, on the contrary, elegant and prosperous, was puzzling. The trig neatness of her hair, her clothing, her shoes, her gloves, the light grace of her walk (though she was at least middle-aged) her assured bearing, the way she carried her head, all proclaimed her as being, at one and the same time, both too grand and too plain to be classified with any feminine species familiar to Reifsville.

"I got it!" exclaimed Abe Duttonhoffer, his tilted chair falling forward suddenly from the shock of his

idea. "She's mebb'y a-goin' to buy Baursox' house that's fur sale."

"No-p. It's put out, now, that there house can't be sold. The lawyer says it's got to lay till Charles is in his age."

"There ain't no funeral goin' on that she'd be comin' to," speculated Jake Kuntz. "The only funeral due in Reifsville, the party ain't dead yet."

"What party are you got reference to? Hess's Missus, mebb'y?"

"Yes. Her. I'm to haul fur her, when her funeral is, Mister says."

"It's to be hoped she won't keep you waitin' long fur the job!" said a facetious one, provoking a general laugh.

"It wonders me what that there lady a-goin' up the street there is after out here!" persisted Jake.

"Local colour, mebb'y," suggested Abe.

"What the hell is local colour?"

"*You* are, Jake," retorted Abe. "It's what female authors that plans books, runs round after."

"After *me*! A high-stepper like her?" said Jake with a twirl of his thumb in the direction the lady had taken. "She wouldn't want nothin' to do with me! 'Local colour?'" Jake shook his head. "It's new to me."

"It ain't familiar with me, neither," said another of the loafers.

The mysterious lady had by this time walked beyond the line of their vision.

"It's a wonder, Jake, you didn't schnauffle after her and find out what she's here fur?—you want to know so bad!" said Abe; to which Jake replied, indignantly, "Do you suppose I *would*'a? Do you suppose *you* would'a?"

"Say!"—Abe had another bright idea—"Mebby she's one of Susan Schrekengust's swell city friends!"

"Och, Susan she never has none of them tony city friends of hern wisit her out here, 'ceptin' her fellah; that there 'ristocratic dood that comes to set up with her Sa'rdays," said Jake.

"I guess Susan she has ashamed, a little, of her folks—her bein' a grad-yate," suggested one of the men.

"Susan Schrekengust ain't proud!" retorted a young man among the group. "She's wery nice and common—fur all she's so grand educated that way!"

"Yes, Susan she took lessons a'ready in both Wocal and both Instrumental, and still she's wonderful common," Jake Kuntz backed up the other young man's statement. To still be "common"—that is, not haughty—after having studied "both Wocal and both Instrumental," was to be rather more than human.

"Our Katy she says Susan she kin play sich Liszt Ee-toods on the pyannah!"

"That ain't so much! There's others in Reifsville kin play Ee-toods."

Meantime, unconscious of the interest that followed her, the lady walked slowly, almost shrinkingly, through the silent, empty street of the village. The houses she passed looked uninhabited, for every front shutter was closed and bolted to exclude dust, or sunlight which would fade carpets and furniture coverings. Except on Sundays and at funerals the inhabitants of Pennsylvania Dutch villages and farms live in their kitchens. Mrs. Houghton shuddered inwardly as she noted the crudity of the little homes of the place, the flower-beds bordered with oyster shells, the gay colouring of the wood and brick of the houses, the universal cheapness.

It was such a shock and disappointment that her son, her only child, hitherto so entirely satisfactory, should have got himself actually engaged to a girl

of a Pennsylvania Dutch community like this!—from a home such as these! Mrs. Houghton was on her way now to see the girl; to feel her way to saving Sidney from a mistake so disastrous. It was surely not his true self, but a lower, hitherto unrevealed self that had led her fastidious boy into such a relation! A little “Dutch” school teacher named *Schrekengust*!—the daughter of an illiterate Menno-nite preacher! How such a thing could ever have happened to Sidney, who had always been rather over-sensitive to crudity, to commonness; whose tastes and instincts were so true and fine; who had sometimes seemed to her, for a man, almost too discriminating in his sense of social values——

Even making all due allowance for youth’s hot blood and imprudence, how a son of hers could so have forgotten his traditions, his pride, his consideration for his mother, his ambitions (all of which Sidney had always cherished excessively) as to have let himself be carried away against his judgment, against his self-interest (she had never before known Sidney to act against his self-interest), and actually propose *marriage* to a Pennsylvania Dutch “girl of the people”——

“It would seem that sex is the strongest force in a man’s life,” she thought. “It will make a man sacrifice anything! Women ought to refuse to bear sons, for between war and love, what *good* do we get of them?”

It was a most embarrassing and painful errand, this on which she had come here to-day to Reifsville.

“But I’d go through anything to save Sidney from such a marriage!” she told herself, passionately.

She was quite sure that when he recovered from this vulgar infatuation and came to himself he would thank her with all his soul for having rescued him.

It was trying enough to have your only son, to

whom you yourself had always been all the world, transfer his devotion to another; but to have him love an impossible person, one whom, with the greatest straining of your charity, you could not take into your heart and life—this was indeed hard to bear.

The straw to which she clung was the fact that Sidney, though very much in love, was not so far gone as not to be as aware as she herself was of the disadvantages of his entanglement.

"I believe he would be ready to break it off if he had not put himself under such great obligations to her—borrowing money from her!—gracious!—how *could* he do that?" she marvelled for the hundredth time. "To let a self-supporting girl lend him money!—*my son!*"

If he himself had not admitted it, she never would have believed it possible. But she had surprised him yesterday with a visit at his lodgings at the university town where he was taking a post-graduate course in International Law, and had found his sitting-room furnished in beautiful mahogany, which he had been obliged to acknowledge had been purchased by him and Miss Schrekengust for their future housekeeping, and paid for with her savings of three years. He was meantime using it. Also his new golf outfit—she had loaned him seventy-five dollars for that!

"But where is your *pride*, Sidney!" she had cried out to him in shocked astonishment. "To let this working-girl give you things you can't afford!"

"She's not a working-girl, Mother," he had protested. "She's a school teacher."

"A village school teacher—named Schreckenbust!"

"Schrekengust—not bust! Don't make it worse than it is! It's bad enough, in heaven's name!"

"Oh, you admit that it's bad enough?" she had hopefully commented.

"Can there be any doubt of it?"

"Don't you see, you poor deluded boy, that this vulgar girl has tried to make sure of you by *buying* you?"

"She's not vulgar!—though of course I must admit," Sidney had groaned, "that her people *are*!"

"She can't be so very different from her people—you say she *lives* with them. I never would have believed it possible, Sidney, that *you* could fall in love with a common girl!"

"Mother, I've come to see that there's such a lot of difference between common people and just plain, simple people like the Schrekengusts."

"You *know* you cannot afford to marry out of your class! Remember, Sidney, you are still dependent on me, and if you should marry beneath you I certainly would not deny myself any least comfort in order to help you and your Dutch wife!"

"Mother, dear, you are wasting breath, for I see it all just as you do! But Susanna's *got* me!"

"Where did you meet her?"

"At one of the university dances a year ago."

"This thing has been going on a whole year and you have never told me!"

"I've been engaged to her only six months. It has seemed impossible to tell you—I knew so well how you'd take it, dear. I hated to worry and distress you."

"But why should you do anything that *can* worry and distress me? Surely your standards and mine cannot be different, Sidney, such close companions as we have always been! I thought we understood each other so perfectly—and now it seems that I did not really know you!"

"I hate to be such a disappointment to you, Mother—but somehow I can't feel that I have

lowered my standards in falling in love with Susanna."

"And yet you are more class-conscious than I am, for you are a Houghton! You can't make that girl happy. Such a name! Schrekengust! *Why* is her name Schrekengust?" she exclaimed, despairingly. "It seems so unnecessary!"

"That objection to her will fortunately be removed by her marriage to me."

"Where does she live?"

"Reifsville. Five miles from here."

"I shall go to see her."

"Don't!" Sidney had exclaimed protestingly; then suddenly, unaccountably, he had laughed. "Really, Mother, dear, I warn you—don't! Susanna'd upset you dreadfully!"

"Why doesn't she upset *you*, if the bare idea of my meeting her strikes you as so incongruous?"

"She has upset me! Bowled me over!"

Mrs. Houghton had suddenly resolved to say nothing more about going to see the girl. She would take her unawares, as she had taken Sidney to-day.

So here she was in Reifsville, on the very next afternoon, on her way to the home of the Schrekengusts.

It was the last house of the village: a white frame house with green shutters, shaded by great trees. It was really picturesque; the only attractive house in Reifsville. Mrs. Houghton, appraising it while she waited for an answer to her knock on the door (a delightful old-fashioned knocker, no bell), had to admit that by a happy accident the girl's home was, from the outside, very passable.

A typical dialogue between two village women parting from each other at the door of the next house set her nerves on edge at the thought of her son's close association with such people.

"Good-by. Come back again soon. Ain't?"

"Thank you. And you are to come over, mind!"

"Thank you. I will. Good-by. Come over soon, now!"

"Good-by. And don't *you* forget to come over soon. Ain't, you won't?"

"Thanks; I won't forget. And don't you forget neither to come back."

"Thanks. I won't, (I'll be over then again, when it suits. Good-by."

"Good-by. Don't make it too long till——"

Mrs. Houghton was just beginning to wonder whether they ever would succeed in concluding their leavetaking—when the Schrekengusts' door was opened and there stood before her a sweet-faced elderly woman in Mennonite garb who, with mingled shyness and surprise, showed the stranger into the parlour.

And here Mrs. Houghton experienced genuine astonishment. It was not at all the sort of room she had expected to see. Old Sheraton furniture of graceful lines and exquisite inlaid decoration, framed copies of famous paintings, an old woven carpet of the sort the colonists brought over—how had people named "Schrekengust," living in this Pennsylvania Dutch village, come by such things? The room actually showed cultured taste! Could she be mistaken and had Sidney *not* turned his back on his birth and breeding in choosing this girl——

But that momentary hope was dashed—there was the Mennonite mother who had answered her knock at the door; and Sidney's own admission that his marriage would be disadvantageous and outside his own class.

In a moment Miss Schrekengust appeared in the doorway.

She, too, like the room, was not just what Mrs.

Houghton had expected to see. At a first glance one might have made the mistake of taking her, from her dress and manner, for a thoroughbred; indeed, her simplicity and self-possession as, with a slight inquiry in her innocent eyes, she came into the room and offered her hand to the stranger, lent her a certain distinction.

Mrs. Houghton had been prepared graciously to put an awkward country girl at her ease, as a necessary preliminary to convincing her of the undesirability of her marrying Sidney Houghton; but it was she herself who, for a moment, felt confused and at a loss.

"I—you *are* Miss Schrekengust?"

"Yes?" replied the girl on a questioning note. "Will you sit down?"

Mrs. Houghton pulled herself together to focus her forces upon her purpose to save her son (for however presentable the girl might prove to be superficially, she was nevertheless not of Sidney's world).

"I don't believe she'll be difficult," she thought, noting, as she sat down, the sweetness of the child's mouth, the infantile look of her eyes, the soft drawl of her speech.

"You have something to sell?" inquired Miss Schrekengust, encouragingly.

Mrs. Houghton smiled involuntarily at being taken for a travelling saleswoman. The girl must, after all, be unsophisticated not to recognize——

"I am Mrs. Houghton—Mr. Sidney Houghton's mother. May I," she quickly added in a tone impressively grave and reserved, to check the girl's start of pleased surprise which seemed to threaten to rush at her with a caress, "have a little talk with you?"

Miss Schrekengust's intuitions were evidently not dull; she recovered instantly from her impulsive delight, folded her hands quietly in her lap, and without

speaking, her clear young eyes fixed upon Mrs. Houghton's face, waited.

"My son has told me of his—of your—friendship."

"I appreciate your kindness in coming away out here to see me," said Miss Schrekengust, gratefully.

Mrs. Houghton noted that she spoke without the Pennsylvania Dutch accent.

"But I am sorry to tell you, Miss Schrekengust, that I don't approve of my son's relations with you—his owing you money—his using your furniture! He never went into debt in his life before he knew you, Miss Schrekengust; he never thought of buying things he couldn't afford; I didn't think him capable of doing such things!—such things as he confessed to me yesterday!"

"Confessed?"

"Of course he feels the degradation of such a relation!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon—you got a wrong impression—Sidney does not feel that our relation is 'degrading'!"

"I mean his relation of debtor to you. He was horribly ashamed to admit it to me. Never before in his life has he done anything that he was ashamed to tell *me*, his mother. I can see that he has really deteriorated; and naturally I am distressed and worried."

Mrs. Houghton paused, feeling that she had put it well.

But Miss Schrekengust smiled upon her reassuringly. "That is too bad, for of course you have misunderstood. It's because Sidney and I have such a high ideal of love that these material considerations don't enter in at all, don't affect us."

Mrs. Houghton checked a smile at this youthfully complacent idealism. It was evidently sincere enough in the girl's case, but Mrs. Houghton could

not quite see Sidney so uplifted by love or anything else as to be unaffected by "material considerations!"

"An honourable man cannot ignore 'these material considerations,' Miss Schrekengust, and I am very, very sorry that you have encouraged Sidney to do so. You have meant to be generous to him, no doubt, but unfortunately you have led him to forget the standards of a gentleman, and to do what men of his class, Miss Schrekengust, do not do. Of course I'm quite sure that you erred only in—well, in ignorance. But that does not alter the fact that for the first time in his life I am forced to be ashamed of my son!"

"But I am sure you have no real cause to be," Miss Schrekengust pleaded.

"If your traditions and environment had been just what Sidney's have been—if you had been brought up with his standard—you would see it as I do; as *he* really sees it."

"Don't you think you take it too seriously? It's after all a very small matter."

"I am extremely sorry," said Mrs. Houghton, gravely, "that you have apparently led Sidney to think it 'a small matter.' I am very much afraid, Miss Schrekengust, that your influence on my son's character does not seem to have been of the best. And surely true love *should* bring out the best of a man; don't you think so?"

"It surely must," the girl assented.

"That is why I cannot believe that Sidney's feeling for you *is* quite true. I hope I don't hurt you very much by saying so? If I could find him improved by his relation to you instead of deteriorated——"

The girl's soft eyes met Mrs. Houghton's without a flicker. "I'm afraid you flatter me, Mrs. Houghton."

"*Flatter* you!"

"When you rate the influence of my short eleven

months' acquaintance with your son above your twenty-five years in influencing and moulding him; and above those traditions and that environment to which you referred."

Mrs. Houghton caught her breath as she thought of how "kindly and patiently" she had intended to reason with a crude and probably over-awed country girl!

Miss Schrekengust, on her side, was saying to herself, "Sidney is not doing very well by me in the way of a mother-in-law."

"Your parents are Mennonites?" asked Mrs. Houghton rather abruptly.

"Yes."

"And you have always lived here in Reifsville?"

"Yes, except during the four years that I spent at a boarding school."

"And do you know," asked Mrs. Houghton, gently, "what a very, very different background Sidney has had?"

"In Middleburg?"

Was there a note of laughter in the question? Mrs. Houghton could not be quite sure; the girl's face was serious enough. "My son's associations—at home, in college, in society—his inherited tastes and instincts, Miss Schrekengust, from a long line of— Oh, my child, marriage at best forces one to so *much* compromising and adapting and adjusting, that it is very necessary, if there's to be any least chance of making a success of it, for the pair to at least *start* on an equal footing, with as many points of contact in their background as possible. If they start with wide gaps and differences in their experiences and their bringing-up they are doomed to misunderstanding and failure."

Mrs. Houghton again felt she had put it well; strongly though delicately.

But Miss Schrekengust, continuing to gaze at her with unwavering eyes, did not reply.

"Don't you agree with me, Miss Schrekengust?"

"But surely two people who are very essentially different are not apt to fall in love with each other. And the merely superficial differences cannot kill love. I think we can always trust ourselves to love."

"Are you so very much in love with my son that your faith in love is quite boundless?" asked Mrs. Houghton with a slightly supercilious lift of her brows.

"What seems a more important point to me is that he is very much in love with me," smiled Miss Schrekengust.

"And you think it no drawback at all that you and Sidney come from such different environments?"

"We shouldn't dream of letting such nonsense interfere with our love, Mrs. Houghton. If we did we'd be unworthy of it! It's a gift of the gods!—and not to be treated lightly or sordidly."

"But 'such nonsense' *will* interfere with your love! 'Such nonsense' makes it quite impossible that you should have the same outlook upon life, the same instincts, the same friends, the same prestige. You would differ at all points!"

"You predict a lively time for us!" smiled Miss Schrekengust.

Mrs. Houghton stared. Was it impossible to upset the girl's serenity?

"I suppose Sidney has told you, Miss Schrekengust, that after he has finished his work at the university next May his Uncle George Houghton of New York is going to secure for him a diplomatic appointment?—his uncle being a man of influence and in close touch with the Administration."

"Yes, of course I know of Sidney's prospects."

"But don't you see," Mrs. Houghton earnestly

argued, "that Sidney being, as you know, quite poor, can't marry a girl with no money—the diplomatic salaries are too small; and Sidney's tastes are not simple. And besides——"

"Yes?" Miss Schrekengust prompted as Mrs. Houghton hesitated.

"Besides," she plunged in, courageously, "the education of a wide social experience is surely a prerequisite for being the wife of a diplomat to a foreign country. A foreign diplomat, more than most men, needs a real helpmate, a partner, in a wife. Do you feel that you would be equal to filling such a social position, Miss Schrekengust?"

"Well," Miss Schrekengust thoughtfully replied in her soft drawl, "I don't believe the foreign governments will find me any worse than I shall find them."

"But I am serious, Miss Schrekengust! I am sure that you and Sidney are making a terrible mistake in thinking that you could possibly pull together, when your rearing and inheritance have been so widely different!"

"I know Sidney's ideals and principles are not quite so severe as mine—but I have hopes for him."

"His marriage would drag him down!" exclaimed Mrs. Houghton, losing a bit the restraint which thus far she had tried hard to exercise. "His engagement has already done so! Sidney admits as much!"

"Oh, but I am sure you do him injustice," said Miss Schrekengust, serenely.

"But the financial side of it? Sidney has nothing of his own—not a dollar except what I choose to give him. If he should marry out of his class, I shouldn't dream of helping him."

"Then I'm afraid I think it would be a very good thing for him to 'marry out of his class,' for it's time he stood on his own feet."

"He could not possibly support a wife on a diplomat's salary."

"I've always been able to live on anything I've *had* to live on."

"But Sidney's tastes are not so simple."

"I know he's inclined to be luxurious; but I'm sure I shall be able to hold him in, never fear," said Miss Schrekengust, again speaking reassuringly.

"Has he told you that he and his half-brother are the only natural heirs of their Uncle George Houghton?—and that Mr. Houghton is a very eccentric as well as a very rich old man who wouldn't leave a cent of his money to any one who displeased him? Mr. Houghton has a great deal of family pride and he is very ambitious for Sidney, and it would certainly displease him excessively to have Sidney marry disadvantageously; so much so that he would undoubtedly leave all his money to my step-son, though he has always disliked Joe and been very fond of Sidney. So you see, Miss Schrekengust, you have Sidney's welfare in your hands; his undoing or his salvation."

"And you are quite sure that Mr. George Houghton would classify Sidney's marriage to me under that head—'disadvantageous'?"

"I think I have made it clear to you *why* he would do so."

"I'm afraid you haven't. You have spoken of backgrounds, environments, incomes—but Sidney and I know that a great passion, any big emotional experience, is not to be measured against such cheap things as those. We are not so stupid as to give such false values to the real things of life!"

"Do you really think you would be worth more to Sidney than all the things he would lose by marrying you?"

"Heaps and oodles more!"

"It is nice," said Mrs. Houghton in a hushed tone

which would have been rather crushing to a timid soul, "to have such a high opinion of one's value!"

"It is not so much a high opinion of my own value as a low opinion of the values you would measure against me."

"Then, Miss Schrekengust," said Mrs. Houghton, rising and looking pale and cold, "in spite of all I have said to you, you refuse to give up my son?"

"He has not asked me to give him up, Mrs. Houghton," replied Miss Schrekengust, also rising.

"I have asked you and have shown you clearly why your marriage to him would be bad for you both. If you love him you will release him!"

"I know I would if I were the heroine of a melodrama. At this point in the play I would tragically and idiotically give up my true love for his best good, and mysteriously disappear! But if I do that——"

Miss Schrekengust paused, looking very thoughtful; and Mrs. Houghton, unable to repress the eagerness born of this hopeful pause, urged her on with a rather breathless, "Well?"

"If I do renounce Sidney," the girl sighed, "I suppose I shall then seriously consider accepting another proposal of marriage," she astoundingly announced, "which I am afraid might injure Sidney's financial prospects even more than his marriage with me would do."

"I don't quite follow you," said Mrs. Houghton, repressing her eagerness. "How could your marriage with any one else affect Sidney's financial prospects?"

"My marriage with Mr. George Houghton might quite seriously affect Sidney. For you see, I'd be Sidney's Aunt Susan instead of his wife. I think that would affect Sidney quite disagreeably."

Mrs. Houghton stared. "You—you know Mr. George Houghton?—and he—he wants to *marry* you! But he—why, his——"

Her astonishment choked her. She could not speak. Her brother-in-law's family pride was almost an obsession with him! He had remained a bachelor all his life because he had never found a woman he considered quite worthy to marry a Houghton! That proud old man to have become infatuated with a young girl like this!—a village nobody!

"He's in his dotage!" she exclaimed.

"Oh!" breathed Miss Schrekengust, "thanks!"

"I mean, Miss Schrekengust, that you are such a child—and Mr. Houghton is over seventy! And his family pride—he is such a—a——"

"Snob?" Miss Schrekengust suggested.

"A year ago George Houghton would have thought he was stooping if he'd been marrying a duchess!"

"A year ago," said Miss Schrekengust quite truthfully, "he had not met *me*."

Again Mrs. Houghton stared helplessly. Anything more extraordinary than this girl's complacency she had never encountered.

"But I promise you," added the girl, "that I'm not going to marry Mr. George Houghton."

"But, Miss Schrekengust, if Sidney takes you from his uncle, then his uncle will have a double reason for disinheriting him! This is really a dreadful situation!"

"Isn't it! I thought you would find it so."

"But what shall we *do* about it?" cried Mrs. Houghton, desperately.

"We? You mean you and I?"

"Surely, Miss Schrekengust, I can hardly believe you would be so blind to your own interests as to choose a penniless boy like Sidney if you can marry his uncle!"

"But doesn't love enter at *all* into your ideas of marriage, Mrs. Houghton? I love Sidney and I do

not love his Uncle George. I don't love his Uncle George at *all*!"

"Then you have already refused to marry Mr. George Houghton?" Mrs. Houghton wonderingly asked.

"I shouldn't think of marrying a man seventy years old. Unless, of course," she quickly added, "I were driven to recklessness by losing the man I love."

"But how on earth did old George Houghton ever take it, being refused by a—well, a girl without either great fortune or great position?" cried Mrs. Houghton, her amazed curiosity quite upsetting her dignity.

"Oh, I'm sure he knows, as any other old man would know, that he can't expect to be wildly attractive to a young girl of eighteen. Even a Houghton must know that he has become a little slow at seventy."

"Well!" Mrs. Houghton exclaimed, unexpectedly, "I do hope it has taken some of the conceit out of him! George Houghton refused!—and by—— But I must say, Miss Schrekengust, I think you are extremely foolish! He can't live long."

"That, of course, is an inducement. And yet—well, you see, I love Sidney."

"You must love him very, very much!" admitted Sidney's mother, almost softened.

"I do, Mrs. Houghton."

Mrs. Houghton quickly reflected, "If she marries George, Sidney's certain not to get any of his money. If she marries Sidney there's at least a chance——"

Her glance swept the girl from head to foot. She really was attractive, and more than presentable; not at all what she had expected to find; although of course her family would prove very embarrassing——

Mrs. Houghton suddenly held out her hand. "If you love him enough to refuse a great fortune and a

great position for his sake, I suppose you must, after all, be the girl he ought to marry."

"I'm sure I am," Miss Schrekengust said as she took the offered hand.

When Mrs Houghton had gone, the young girl collapsed helplessly in a little heap upon the old davenport before the fire. "If only I see Sidney before she does!—else what on earth will he think of my yarn about his old uncle's wanting to marry me!"

CHAPTER II

EVENING OF THE SAME DAY

IF MRS. HOUGHTON could have caught a glimpse of the Schrekengust household at supper a half hour later she would have felt that, after all, rather than have her son marry into a family like this, she would infinitely prefer that he give the girl up to his Uncle George and thus lose all hope of inheriting a fortune. For the good taste manifested in the Schrekengust's parlour, which had so surprised her, did not extend beyond that room to the rest of the house. And the girl, Susan, herself, was a quite unique member of her family. She had never tried to make over her parents and her two elder sisters as she had made over the parlour. She loved her family very much as they were, though she was not above finding them embarrassing sometimes.

The large kitchen where they were gathered for their substantial evening meal of fried "ponhaus," fried potatoes, pie, and coffee, was also the family living room. It was unpapered, bare of ornament, the floor covered with a patched rag carpet, the furniture of the plainest and cheapest.

Mr. and Mrs. Schrekengust and the two elder daughters, Lizzie and Addie, women of thirty-five and thirty-two, all wore the plain garb of the Menno-nite faith, and their religion obliged them to shun not only all personal adornment, but all beauty in the home, as they would have shunned the very devil himself. So that in conceding to Susan a free

hand in the parlour, they had gone as near the ragged edge of perdition as they dared.

Addie and Lizzie were both natural born spinsters, tall, angular, homely, puritanic. Lizzie, like her mother, was talkative, lively, almost boisterous, and immensely energetic; her warm, generous impulses constantly outran her means of gratifying them, and her Pennsylvania Dutch prudence seemed always to be at war with her big heart.

Addie, on the contrary, was like her father, economical, minutely calculating; yet just as kind and unselfish as the less careful Lizzie. Her manner, also like her father's, was quiet and gentle, and she willingly let herself be dominated by her noisy sister Lizzie.

"What fur didn't you ast Sidney's Mom to stay and eat along, Susie?" her mother inquired in a mildly reproachful tone as she helped herself from a platter of "ponhaus" and then passed the dish to her youngest daughter. "To leave her go and set waitin' in the station fur the train to come, when it don't come till away past supper time a'ready—when she might be settin' here with us eatin' hot wittles! What'll she *think* anyhow?—and you bein' promised to her son yet! It don't look right—that it don't!"

It was a difficult question for Susan to meet without betraying what her parents and sisters would be quite unable to understand—that Sidney's mother didn't think her "good enough" for Sidney. For the Schrekengusts, on their side, didn't think any man living quite worthy of their wonderful Susan.

She was the child of her parents' old age, being fourteen years younger than her sister Addie, and she had always been the pet and idol of the family. They had all denied themselves, ever since her birth, to give her a chance in life such as none of them had

ever had. They had never let her drudge as they had all drugged; they had sent her away to school, had kept her well-dressed, had provided her with enough pocket money to enable her to hold up her end among her schoolmates, had given her her own way always. Susan was all their happiness in life; the one warm, bright, glowing spot in their otherwise colourless existence. In the self-repression of their Mennonite faith, the affection and care they gave to her were the only outlet their hearts knew; their only personal expression.

And they thought themselves well repaid for all their sacrifices by the charming, lovable result achieved. For strangely enough, Susan was not spoiled by their devotion and indulgence. Contrary to the usual effect of such rearing, she deeply appreciated all that had been done for her and was passionately loyal and devoted to her family.

As for her engagement to Sidney Houghton, far from thinking that the young man had condescended, the Schrekengusts considered it entirely natural that a "stylish towner" should want to marry Susan, and they deemed him a lucky man to have won her; for being too simple and unsophisticated to draw subtle distinctions, they did not perceive in Sidney any of those variances from ordinary mortals which had been pointed out that day to Susan by Sidney's mother.

There was something touching to Susan about this childlike ignorance of the world's standards, in which her people lived. She had already, at eighteen years of age, seen enough of life to value, at its true and high worth, their simple goodness and kindness, their genuineness, their innocence.

"Mrs. Houghton said she was not hungry, Mother, and that she wanted to take a walk about the village before train time," Susan readily improvised in reply

to her mother's question, being accustomed to protect her parents thus from all the wounds and shocks that constantly threatened them from the uncomfortable differences between her and them in education and experience and social relations.

"But the train to town don't leave here till a quarter over seven o'clock a'ready, Susie; and here last night she was late a-whole hour yet, that there seven o'clock train!" replied her mother.

"I seen her when she come up the street from the station," said Lizzie (it would have taken an expert to tell whether she referred to the train or the lady), "and it wondered me that a city person would be that plain dressed."

"That's *why* she dresses plainly—because she's not a villager. You see, Lizzie, I'm right in not letting you tog me up," Susan pointed out.

"Even Sidney don't dress up when he comes to set up with you, Susie, like the young fellahs here dresses up to go to see their girls. Ain't, he don't?" said her mother.

"He considers himself a very well-dressed young man," smiled Susan.

"Well, he anyhow always looks becoming and wery genteel, no matter what he's got on," said Lizzie, admiringly. "I do now like his shape and the way his shoulders is so straight acrost like a sojer's yet!"

"He is an awful pretty man," agreed Mrs. Schrekengust.

This was too much for Susan, "Oh, Mother, I wouldn't marry a *pretty* man! Heavens! He's handsome, not pretty! He's manly looking. And he looks what he is—an aristocrat."

"Aristocrats is fur out in the old country, not fur America," protested her father. "We wouldn't stand fur havin' no sich aristocrats here. What fur

do you call him an aristocrat? What's his title then?"

"I guess Susie means the nice manners he's got at him," ventured Addie, who spoke seldom. "I like so well to watch him use his manners," she blandly added.

"Yes, well, if he don't pay so much attention to 'em that he forgets his morals!" warned the Menno-nite preacher gravely. "Manners is all wery well if used in moderation. A body mustn't go to excesses in 'em. Sometimes I have afraid Sidney goes a little too fur with them manners of hisn."

"Och, yes, he won't even leave our Susan open a door fur herself; or even pick up a handkerchief she's dropped!" cried Lizzie. "If I was Susie I'd keep droppin' things just to see him pick 'em up so polite!"

"He certainly is wery genteel," granted Mrs. Schrekengust.

"It's to be hoped he'll make you a good purwider, Susie, used as you are to full and plenty," said her father.

"But with the education you have given me, Father, I am provided for—I can always support myself if I need to."

"But if you had young children to look after you couldn't turn out and teach school," objected her father. "It's wery important that your husband is a good purwider; fur whiles it's awful honourable to be poor, it's wery inconwenient."

"And to live nice these days," added her mother, "it takes so much more! Ain't, Pop, the times is changed lately since a few years back a'ready?"

"Och, yes, and the young folks they want so much towards what we used to want. Ain't, Mom?"

"Yes, ain't!"

When only a few hours after Mrs. Houghton's departure Sidney unexpectedly arrived at Reifsville

on his bicycle, Susan's feelings as she greeted him were a rather confusing compound of apprehension and relief.

"I came out to warn you, darling," he began as soon as they were alone together (seated on the big old davenport, his arm around her shoulders), "that my mother may swoop down upon you!"

"You came to 'warn' me? Is she dangerous?"

"Very!" he laughed uneasily, "to you and me. Harmless enough otherwise."

"But how can she be dangerous to us?"

"She has other ideas for me. She wants me to marry—well, money—and—oh, and family and all that sort of thing."

"I can't somehow associate such vulgarity with you."

"Vulgarity? But, my love! You are speaking of my mother!"

"Why, no. Of you. But how can she, your mother, imagine your doing a vulgar, sordid thing, when I can't possibly see you like that? She has known you longer."

"And perhaps better. I've always told you, Susanna" (he insisted upon the "old colonial" form of her name as being less commonplace), "that you see me through rose-coloured glasses. I'm not above marrying for money—and other things. Only, I happen to want you more than I want anything else."

"And much, much more than you want to keep in your Uncle George's good graces?"

"I don't mean to lose his favour. I need it too much. He's only got to meet you to be won over. He must meet you *before* he learns of our engagement, so that he will judge you without prejudice. You yourself will be all the argument I shall need to convince him."

"To convince him of what?"

"That you are not my equal, but my superior."

"But if he wants you to marry money and—and family—and other things that have nothing to do with my superiority?"

"You'll make him realize, as you've made me, that you're a prize worth more than all those things, my love!"

"What do you understand by *family*, Sidney? And do you care a lot about family?"

"Yes, I do. I do care for family and money and prestige and all the things I've been brought up to consider of value."

"None of which I bring to you!"

"You know what you bring to me!" he said, holding her close and kissing her.

"And you are quite sure it makes up to you for losing some of those other things?"

"I don't intend to lose any of them."

"But if you did have to?"

"But I shan't have to!"

"Suppose, Sidney," she plunged in astonishingly, "*that your Uncle George wanted to marry me himself*—would you think me very heroic for refusing him and cleaving unto you until death us do part?"

Sidney, startled, took his arm from her shoulder, tilted up her chin and looked into her eyes.

"What are you driving at, imp of Satan?"

"You see, Mr. George Houghton can't possibly live very long—he's over seventy; I'd soon be a rich widow."

"Do you *know* him?" exclaimed Sidney, amazed.

"*Tell* me—would I be proving myself quite worthy of you, a Houghton, if I refused to marry Uncle George?"

"You'd be too damned unlike any Houghton I ever knew! Excuse me! What's it all about, anyway?"

"Sidney, I have charming news for you! Your

mother is quite reconciled to me; she consents to our marriage!"

"You've *seen* her? She's been here?" he cried, agitatedly.

"This afternoon. And when I pointed out to her that it might injure your financial prospects much more for me to marry Uncle George and become your Aunt Susan than to marry *you*, she saw that I was so noble as to be worthy to be her daughter-in-law."

Sidney gaped at her quite idiotically for an instant; then suddenly, his hand dropping from her chin, he threw himself back upon the cushions of the couch and roared with laughing. "You made her believe that?" he shouted. "You little devil! By Jove, you have nerve!"

"She will tell you all about it. I'm glad I've seen you first. What would you have thought about it if you had heard your mother first?"

"I suppose I should have been as gullible as she was and *believed* it!" he said, still laughing. "I did for a moment! You see I have such a large faith in your power to charm that I could even find it credible that a confirmed old bachelor like Uncle George had succumbed to you!"

"The amazing part of it all to your mother was that he could so have forgotten his snobbery——"

"Snobbery? Oh, I don't know that I'd call Uncle George a snob, exactly."

"I know *I* would; a man who has remained a bachelor for seventy years because he couldn't find a wife worthy of a Houghton! What *is* a snob if that isn't?"

"Well, he's a mighty fine old chap, anyway," insisted Sidney, growing sober as he wondered, with a sinking of his heart, how much his mother had seen of the household here. If she had not gotten beyond this room and Susan, she had yet much to learn!

"Tell me all about Mother's visit, dearest," he urged, leaning back and again slipping his arm to its comfortable and delightful resting place on her shoulders.

Throughout her dramatic and graphic report of her afternoon's experience, Sidney's mingled amusement and anxiety made him alternately chuckle and frown—until she came to repeat his mother's views as to the bad influence Susan had had upon his character, when the frown remained fixed.

"I tried to make her see how she misjudged you," said Susan; "how the furniture you are using is just some of our *aus tire*——"

"Our which?" exclaimed Sidney.

"Pennsylvania Dutch for household furnishings. She told me I was undermining those fine instincts which all gentlemen of your class possess by inheritance; and that if your fineness was united to my coarse lack of sensibility, we'd be more like Kilkenny cats than turtle doves; and it was just then that I had the happy inspiration to have Uncle George crazy to marry me. It worked. I'm quite worthy of you, Sidney."

"Are you aware, dear," he asked, gravely, "that you are making fun of my mother?"

"I'm stating facts. If the facts are funny—well, they'd better be funny than sad. I might be as bad as your mother evidently expected to find me: talking Pennsylvania Dutch and chewing gum and wearing my hair in a weird design—instead of the simple, sweet Maud Muller I am! Be thankful!"

"I am! Did Mother—stay long?"

He had started to say, "see any of the rest of the family?"—but checked himself in time.

"About an hour. *My* mother thought it dreadful that I didn't ask her to stop and have supper with us, since her train wasn't due until long after she left

here. But you see, Sidney," said Susan, her voice falling a note, "I couldn't explain to Mother why she had come; and that her reason for coming made it rather impossible for me to ask her to break bread with us! We, too, have our pride."

"Susan, dear!" he said, gently, kissing her again, even while feeling very glad in his heart that his mother had escaped a meal at the Schrekengusts'—the effect of which would have been tragic! "It's all such nonsense, dear! Don't let us allow it to disturb our happiness and our love!"

"I shan't," she promised, nestling into his embrace. "For of course it *is* all nonsense, Sidney. And our love isn't, is it?"

"I'm very curious, Susanna," he remarked after a moment's palpitating silence in each other's arms, "to hear Mother's account of your love affair with Uncle George! You *are* a rascal!"

"When I was a child, Sidney, I used to have a little way of entertaining myself by experimenting upon my playmates or my family to note the effect upon them of sudden surprising announcements—announcements of purely imaginary adventures I had had or discoveries I had made. I would say to a mob of children, 'I was a waif left on Mr. Schrekengust's doorstep; I am not his child at all; my rich aunt is coming to fetch me this after, with a coach and four.' 'Four what?' some wretchedly literal child would inquire. I didn't know. Or I would personally conduct a group of children up into the attic of our house to point out to them the signs of a buried treasure under the floor—a blood stain in the shape of an arrow pointing to a certain spot in the boards. This particular invention became so real to me that I once persuaded Lizzie to help me tear up the flooring. So to-day, while your mother was trying in vain to convince me of my total unworthiness of you, it

suddenly struck me that it would be an interestingly complicated situation if rich old bachelor Uncle George who must be placated were (unsuspected by the Houghton family) in love with me and wanting to marry me. 'Now,' I said to myself adventurously, 'I'll give dear Mother-in-law something to worry *about!*' It was not that I bore her any ill will, Sidney, dear, but only that I was curious to see how such an unlooked-for complication would strike her."

"But what's going to happen when she finds you out?—that's the question!" exclaimed Sidney, rather ruefully.

"Perhaps you'd better take me to New York right away and let me beguile Uncle George into proposing to me. You seem to think I'd be a good bait for big fish."

"I can't let you tamper with his young affections! But I do think we shall have to get married before Mother finds you out. I'll take you to New York and contrive to introduce Uncle George to you quite casually; and you'll be your charmingest; and while his impression of you is still fresh and delightful we'll run around the corner and get married and then run back and get his blessing. How does it strike you?"

Susan shook her head. "We can't think of getting married until you are earning enough to be independent of your mother."

"Oh, Susanna, I can't wait that long before I take you unto myself for better, for worse!"

"It would be exclusively 'for worse' if we married with nothing to live on. I couldn't consent to such recklessness. The Pennsylvania Dutch were ever a prudent race, you know."

Sidney controlled his inclination to wince at her reference to her objectionable Pennsylvania Dutch blood. He did not like it a bit better than his mother did.

"I wonder, Susanna," he said, "what Mother really thought of you!"

"All too soon you'll know!"

"No, I shan't; that's the rub. Of course I do know already that she thinks you charming. But she will be slow to admit it to me."

"Why, Sidney?"

"She was so prejudiced!—because you see, dear, she so hated your having loaned me money; and my secrecy about you—and all the rest of it."

"I never did understand why you would never tell her about me. Were you only trying to spare my feelings when you said she would be opposed to your being engaged until you were self-supporting? Was your real reason my—my family?"

"Oh, my dear, Mother is so full of the prejudices of her class! This room must have surprised her," he hastily changed the subject. "You'll admit that it's not just what one would expect to find in a little village like this. Did you tell her how you and I collected this old furniture from old farmhouses about here and had it done up?—and that it, too, is part of our—what do you call it? 'Aus tire?'"

"Dear me, no! She took it for my natural setting. Sidney, you never told me you had a brother."

"A half-brother. Did Mother speak of him? Joe and I never felt in the least like brothers. He never lived at home after I was born. Mother told you, I suppose, how Uncle George cut him when he married a farmhouse servant girl?"

"No, she only told me that if you married me your brother would probably inherit your half of your uncle's money."

"When Joe's wife died two months ago, leaving a baby a week old, Uncle George relented and took him back into favour."

"Did that console Joe?"

"Well, I think it did a little. Joe loves money more than he loves anything in the world. Not as I do, for what I can get out of it. He loves to hoard it. He's a miser. When Uncle George told him, after his marriage, that he'd not leave him a cent, I think Joe had an attack of yellow jaundice!"

"And do you think he wouldn't have married the girl if he had known that would happen?"

"I really can't say. I've never been intimate with Joe."

"What an exciting family you belong to, Sidney!—with your misers and rich uncles and backgrounds and traditions and standards and getting disinherited for marrying persons your distant relatives don't approve! I didn't know such romantic things happened in the U. S. A. It sounds so early Victorian."

"Well, of course Uncle George is a gentleman of the old school."

"A good thing it's an *old* school and passing out!"

"But it was picturesque, Susanna."

"But nothing else very useful."

"Of course I couldn't expect you to see these things just as I do."

"Please, Sidney, don't talk like that; it sounds so like——"

"Well?" he asked as she checked herself.

"Surely you feel that in the fundamental things of life we *are* in sympathy, don't you?" she pleaded.

"Naturally," he responded with a kiss. "Else I shouldn't be here, holding you in my arms!"

His answer satisfied her completely.

"Sidney," she said after a moment, "tell me some more about your brother Joe. I'm so surprised to discover him! It seems so queer you never told me of him. Tell me where he lives, what's his business, who takes care of the motherless baby, why he's a miser when you're a spendthrift (for you are, you

know). Go ahead—talk!” urged Susan with the breathless interest of a child demanding the continuance of a story.

Sidney told off the answers to her questions on his fingers. “Joe’s a farmer; lives at White Oak Farm, the old Houghton homestead between here and Middleburg; Uncle George owns it; Joe works it on shares, and hoards every dollar he earns; the housekeeper he now employs takes care of his baby. Anything more you want to know, Miss Question-Box?”

“Is it a nice baby?”

“I’m no judge. Anyway, I’ve never seen it.”

“Is Joe, then, so very dreadful?”

“He’s a grouch and a screw. I fancy his wife didn’t mind dying—after living a whole year with Joe.”

“Was Joe grown up when you were born?—since you say he didn’t live at home after you were born.”

“He’s only ten years older than I am. His mother died at his birth. He claims that Father left him entirely to servants and that he was awfully neglected always. So at the age of nine, when he acquired a step-mother who tried to take him in hand and make something of him, she could not do a thing with him. He was a hopeless little tough. A cub! Mother simply couldn’t have him about. When I was born her dread of Joe’s contaminating me made Father send him off to boarding school. He was expelled from three schools in five years, for insubordination. Then Father died bankrupt, leaving Mother nothing but his life insurance. She had some income of her own, so we’ve worried along. Joe was fifteen when Father died and had gone to school so little that he could scarcely read and write! So he hired himself out to learn farming. Lived at a Pennsylvania Dutch farm as one of the family for eight years and married their maid servant; so that now you couldn’t

tell him from a born Pennsylvania Dutchman. Talks and thinks and acts like one. Even his ideas about women are 'Dutch': a woman is a breeder and a beast of burden! But he likes farming, and he's done awfully well, though he works like a dog and never spends a cent—just hoards and hoards!"

"And you and your mother have nothing to do with him?"

"Not more than we must. We have to borrow money from him occasionally when we're short. But he never lends us a nickel without security and interest. Tells us he doesn't see why he should provide us with luxuries that he denies himself; that he's slaved like a Chinese coolie for every dollar he has and he doesn't propose to hand it out to people who don't work at all and who despise him. He's a quite impossible grouch, you see!"

"Did you know his wife at all?"

"Never saw her. I never could see why Uncle George resented Joe's marrying a farmer's servant girl—no lady would have married him! But you see, what Uncle George hated was that no sooner had he employed Joe to manage White Oak Farm than Joe up and married that common girl and took her to live at that lovely old, historic, ancestral home made sacred by seven generations of Houghtons having lived there. To desecrate it by putting such a mistress there! Uncle George was all for kicking him out. I suppose, however, Joe was too valuable to him, for it seems that Joe's a quite exceptionally good farmer. But anyway, Uncle George wouldn't let him and his Dutch wife use the front of the house at all. He made Joe keep the front rooms locked up—the beautiful drawing room and library and portrait parlour and some of the gorgeous old bedrooms. Some day I want to show you the place, Susanna: the tapestries, the old rugs, the colonial beds, the old

sideboard. I hope Uncle George wills it to me! Joe and his wife *preferred* living in their kitchen. They were used to it. It was the only place in *that* house where they'd feel at home!"

Susan was silent for a while when Sidney paused, thinking how different had been the lives of these two boys born of the same father.

"Most men are not fit to be fathers," she presently remarked. "I wonder whether Joe will do as badly by his child as your father did by him."

"Probably worse, Father having been a gentleman and Joe being a boor. Joe hates respectability as an owl hates daylight; as much as I hate toughness. He says Mother drove him to hating 'gentility' even more than he naturally hated it."

Susan felt that she could quite understand that. But before she could reply they were interrupted by the entrance of her mother.

Mrs. Schrekengust, wearing the black hood and shawl prescribed by the Mennonite faith for outdoor apparel, carried into the parlour a tray bearing two bottles of ginger ale, two glasses, and a plate of molasses cake.

Sidney, rising to relieve her of it and place it on a table, so embarrassed and confused her by his gallantry that she almost dropped the tray before he could take it.

"I can't used myself to your so polite manners, Sidney!" she said, apologetically. "I wasn't never used to 'em. It wonders me how you kin remember 'em still."

Susan was intensely sensitive to Sidney's invariable wincing from her mother and father and sisters. Try as he would he could not conceal it from her, and though she strove to make excuses for him to herself and to understand, yet she knew that deep down in her heart she resented it.

"Where are you going, Mother?" she asked in surprise at sight of the hood and shawl Mrs. Schrekengust was wearing at this hour when she was usually in bed asleep. Suddenly she noticed that her mother was looking white and frightened. "What is it, Mother?" she exclaimed, rising and going to her side. "What's the matter?"

"Och, Susie, an awful thing happened out in our backyard whiles you and Sidney was settin' in here keepin' comp'ny! Hogenbach's Missus come runnin' over just at supper time to ketch one of her chickens that jumped the fence over and she fell down in one of them fits she gets and smothered to death! Yes, anyhow!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Susan, "Mrs. Hogenbach is dead?"

"Och, yes, three hours ago she died! Out in our backyard yet! And now they are got a jury settin' up at Hogenbach's to see what she died of and I got to go fur such a witness."

She turned to explain to Sidney: "Missus she used to have spells—sich fits, you mind; she'd throw a fit most any time; and I often says to her Mister, 'You don't watch Missus good enough. Some day she'll smother fur you in one of them spells!' But he didn't listen on me. So here this evening when she didn't get home from chasin' her chicken, he come schnaufflin' over to our place after a whiles to see why she didn't come home. She'd been away a full hour. And I tol' him, I says, 'If Missus was off that long, Hen Hogenbach, then this time you carry her in dead.' 'Och,' he says, 'how often'll you tell me that—that I'll carry her in dead? She *never* dies in them spells!' 'But this time, Hen, it *is*!' I says. 'If it's went a whole hour since she didn't get home a'ready, Hen, then you mind, this time it *is*!' And it was! Hen he went out with a lantern and found

her by the pig sty with her face down, smothered to death. She looked awful! So Pop he fetched the coroner. And the coroner he says he must now send fur a jury to set on her and find out what she died of. 'But it ain't necessary,' I argued him, 'to have no jury set; I kin tell you what she died of.' So I tol' him how Missus she gets spells fur ten years back a'ready and this evening she smothered in one of 'em. 'That's what she died of—now you know,' I says. But would you believe it, that there stubborn-headed coroner he wouldn't have it no other way but that a jury must set to find out what she died of. 'But I did tell you a'ready what she died of,' I argued him. 'She has spells! Fur ten years she has 'em! And to-night she smothered in one of 'em!' I says. But no, a jury must come and set on her to find out what she died of! Ain't, Susie, it's awful dumb of that there coroner to have a jury set to see what she died of when I tol' him what—she had spells and smothered."

"Would you like me to go with you?" Sidney politely inquired. "Can I be of any help?"

"Och, no, you stay settin' with Susie and enjoy yourself pickin' a piece," replied Mrs. Schrekengust, indicating the tray—"picking a piece" meaning a light luncheon.

When a few moments later Susan and Sidney were again alone, partaking of the ginger ale and cake, Susan said with a sigh, "This death will be the only thing talked of in Reifsville for the next six months! Oh, how they'll revel in every gruesome detail! I foresee that it's going to drive me to commit a crime, to give them something else to talk about!"

"How glad you'll be, dear, when I take you away into another world!"

"Oh, but, Sidney, dear, I am very much a part of this world, too. I discovered something about my-

self when I went away to school: I found out how dependent I am upon affection. I've always had so much of it lavished on me here. So even if I do have interests that my parents and sisters don't share, they do fill the biggest part of me—and that's my heart!"

"That's awfully sweet of you, dear. You *are* a loyal little soul!"

"More than that! My heart is so *tenacious* where once it has been given!" she sighed. "I can't seem to wrench it loose!"

"Why that sigh?" he quickly asked. "You wish you could stop loving me, but you can't—is that it? Doesn't that prove," he argued, renewing a discussion which for weeks had kept them both on the rack, and which now suddenly drove the colour from their faces, "that I am right and you are wrong, dearest? If *I* were in the wrong about this matter, wouldn't it have killed your love for me, Susanna, dear?"

"Oh, Sidney!" pleaded Susan, piteously, "don't! Please, please, don't let us talk of that again!"

"But, dearest, you don't understand," he persisted, his voice quivering. "You're so obsessed with the conventional view of love and marriage that you won't look at it simply and naturally, as the spontaneous, emotional relation that God ordained it to be!"

"You surely don't believe that it is *right*, Sidney, to bring a child into the world handicapped from the start with illegitimacy!"

"Of course I don't! That need not happen—must not! I only mean that the union of natural rather than legalized love is higher, finer, purer! You and I, Susanna, will never love more hotly, more humanly than we do now! Why, then, deny ourselves the full expression of our love for so material a consideration

as an insufficient income on which to legalize our union? We are losing weeks and months of our precious youth!—of the ecstasy of youth! How can a broad-minded girl like you think that a few ceremonial words can alter the great eternal fact of Love? *Why shouldn't* you give yourself to me now as well as after the marriage ceremony?"

"But why should I? My love for you, Sidney, is something so far above a mere appetite!"

Sidney winced. Susan did sometimes offend his taste. "You speak of our love as 'a mere appetite'!"

She so often found him, in any discussion between them that tended to get out of his hands, twisting her statements out of their obvious meaning; condemning her candid recognition of what he himself had suggested or implied.

"I'm protesting, dear," she answered, "against *your* having that idea of love. To me it is something so different!"

"Sometimes I think, Susanna, dear, that you don't know what real love is, when you can say a—yes, a really coarse thing about it like what you just said! Love is no more an experience wholly of the spirit than it is wholly of the senses. It is a full expression of the entire being!"

"But, Sidney, dear, if the thing you wish is what you keep saying in your letters it is—'a holy expression of love'—why is secrecy necessary?" asked Susan, her voice so pained, her eyes so strained and tortured, that Sidney involuntarily took her hand reassuringly in his. "Why," she continued, "not proclaim such a Gospel to all the world, if it is so true and beautiful?"

"You know the price we'd have to pay for acting openly, dearest!"

"If it's not worth that price, it's not what you claim for it!"

"It's the highest, the most exquisite thing in life, Susanna!"

"Then don't let us desecrate it! To lose our self-control is not high or beautiful or holy!—whatever fine phrases you may use about it, dear!"

"Yet you think a legal marriage is all that!" exclaimed Sidney.

"I still believe in the 'institution of the family'—at least until some better plan for rearing children is suggested. I've never heard of any that would not be much worse for the children than being brought up in families—faulty as family life may be."

"We're talking about love, dear; not about family life and children!"

"But children happen to be the fruit of love, dear; so we can't leave them out of this."

"If you have no higher idea of love than to believe that it is merely for the begetting of children——"

"But that's what Nature uses it for. And, dear, you who have such inordinate family pride—what do you mean by 'family pride'? What becomes of it in a relation such as you wish? You are proud of a line of *well-born* ancestors!"

"Damn my ancestors! When you and I, Susanna, dearest, are yearning for the fullest, the most exquisite expression of ourselves, *why* should we deny ourselves? Why, why? I love you with every part of me—with all my heart and all my mind and all my senses!"

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she tremulously protested, "I cannot, *cannot* believe that what you want is so essential to any demand of our spirits that we can't *wait*! There is nothing I would refuse to go through for the sake of our love; there is nothing in all my life I would count too high a price to pay for it. But to me love is so much more than mere possession. It is a life shared in the open!—our work, our ideals,

our ambitions lived out together harmoniously. That's what marriage means to me. And you would lead me into secrecy, hiding, *shame!*—leading to nothing—nothing but satiety and disgust!”

“Susanna, dearest! How can you sit there and philosophize about a thing that consumes one like a living fire! I want you, Susanna!” he whispered, drawing her into his arms. “You are mine and I am yours—and nothing, nothing else matters! Nothing! Nothing!”

But she forced herself out of his embrace. “Tell me this, Sidney,” she said, her face a deathly white, “would you ask this thing of me if I were a girl of your mother's choosing? Of your own social world? Would you?”

“Perhaps I shouldn't have to plead so hard,” he said, chokingly, “with a more worldly girl! Dearest! Don't be so cruel to me! Come to me! Love me!” he begged, taking her again to his heart. “How can you deny me when——”

A voice in the hall without made them draw apart guiltily.

Mrs. Schrekengust opened the door and stood on the threshold. “The jury's still settin’,” she announced; and Susan, with a sense of deep relief at the interruption, thanked heaven in her heart for Mrs. Hogenbach's timely death. “They're gettin' along, though—that there jury is. They're got it settled that Missus is anyhow dead. They ain't got it made out, though, what she died of. They're still arguin' that—for all I *tol'* 'em a'ready how she had spells and smothered. But it seems my word fur it ain't enough. They have to set awhile till they know oncet what she died of—that dumb they are——”

Mrs. Schrekengust seemed suddenly to sense the fact that she was interrupting a lover's tête-à-tête. She stopped with embarrassing abruptness, closed

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the door sharply, and they heard her walk away the hall.

Neither of them moved or spoke until the sound of her step had passed on to the back of the house and was lost.

Soon the deep silence of the house, penetrating even to this room apart, proclaimed that all the family slept.

But Sidney stayed on.

CHAPTER III

THE FOLLOWING SPRING

March Sixth.

DEAREST SIDNEY:

The time has come at last when I can no longer hold back the question which for weeks and weeks I have not allowed myself to ask you—and which you must have wondered why I have not asked you. It has been because I have been afraid to face your answer.

Oh, Sidney, my love, put me out of the agony of suspense that I've been suffering these many weeks and tell me what it is that has come between you and me! Surely I have not merely *imagined* that you have changed to me?—your visits so far apart and so hasty; your short notes once a week or less often; your altered manner when you *are* with me—what is it, Sidney? If you have grown to love me less, *why* have you? Is it anything I have said or done? Are you disappointed in me? *Can* such love as ours grow cold and die? If it can, I can never again trust anything in life! Oh, my love, I am so wholly yours—every beat of my heart, every thought of my mind is for you—I have no life apart from you—I have given myself to you so entirely! It surely is not possible that you *could* take yourself out of my life, as you seem to be doing!

Do you know that yesterday you came and went without kissing me, after not seeing me or writing to me for three weeks?

Can it be, Sidney, that if I had *not* given you all that a woman can give, you might still be my devoted lover? Can it be that having satisfied and sated your desire for me, you are *through* with me?

Susan paused here, as she thought how "coarse" Sidney would consider that question. But she did not change it.

She wrote on feverishly:

I implore you, dearest, not to treat this letter as all my letters to you have been treated lately—but to answer it as soon as you get it and tell me that I have been torturing myself for nothing; that you *are* mine—as I am yours.

Or if you cannot truthfully say that, at least let me have the truth.

SUSANNA.

Ten days later, her letter having remained unanswered, Susan sent a telegram to Sidney:

Did you get my letter of March sixth? Wire answer. S.

It was two days before she received a reply:

Letter received. Very busy. Spring exams. Will write soon. SIDNEY.

After a long, dark, despairing week, his letter at last arrived.

DEAR SUSAN:

Why let yourself get morbid and hysterical and imagine things?—just because I relax now and then from the strain of our first ardour. Naturally, one can't live at fever heat all the time. Be sensible, my dear girl, and please, please don't stir me up, at this critical time of my spring exams, with such forlorn wails, such wild telegrams! Be your old, jolly, funny self, can't you? You've become so serious and solemn, it quite gives me the blues to go to Reifsville.

I'm afraid you must not look for me for the next few weeks; I shall be too busy to get away. I shan't have

time for much writing, either. So don't go off on a tangent, my dear, if you don't hear from me.

Take care of yourself. Write me one of your old-time funny letters that used to make me roar so that the house-keeper here would come running to see what ailed me!

Yours,
SIDNEY.

Susan had recently subscribed for the daily paper published in the university town where Sidney studied and she had learned from it that he was not too busy with his spring examinations to attend dances and theatre parties, to play in golf and tennis tournaments, and to take automobile trips.

The "jolly-funny" letter that he requested was not written and nothing further passed between them for two weeks.

Meantime, the newspapers from the university town were revealing to Susan a fact that made her heart turn to lead. Day after day she read in the "Social Column" of the newspaper a certain name coupled with Sidney's.

Miss Laura Beresford, daughter of the newly elected President of the University, and Mr. Sidney Houghton, a student in the school of International Law, led in an old-fashioned German given last night at Phillipps Hall.

Or,

Miss Laura Beresford gave a dinner on Tuesday night in honour of her house guest, Mrs. Joseph Houghton of Middleburg, Pa., mother of Mr. Sidney Houghton of the Law School.

Or,

Mrs. Joseph Houghton gave a small dinner dance on Thursday night at Hotel Mortimer in honour of Miss

Laura Beresford and of her son, Mr. Sidney Houghton of the Law School.

Always when Sidney's name was listed "among those present," at any social affair, the name of Miss Laura Beresford was sure to be there.

Was Mrs. Houghton trying to separate Sidney from her? Susan wretchedly speculated. And was he only too ready to be enticed away?

At last, when she could no longer bear his silence and his continued remaining away from her, she wrote again, a long, heart-broken letter, a passionate outcry, pleading with him for her life's happiness, her honour——

But no sooner was it written than she tore it into bits.

"I won't beg! I won't cringe! Nothing that I can say to him can alter the fact that he no longer loves me!"

It added much to her suffering, during these dark days, to realize the dumb misery of her doting family in their consciousness of her unhappiness. That she should be a source of pain instead of comfort to them who had sacrificed so much for her, hurt her bitterly.

She suddenly resolved, one day, that, as Sidney would not come to her or answer her letters, and as she had somewhat to say to him which *must* be said, at whatever cost to her of wounded pride, she would have to go to him.

The tragic extent of his alienation from her seemed to her to be measured by her instinctive conviction that if she should notify him of her coming, he would manage to get out of her way. It seemed to her, when this conviction had burned its way into her heart, that nothing further which she might be called upon to endure could add to the humiliation and agony of that hour.

It took all the resolution she could command to coerce herself to the self-crucifixion of forcing an interview upon him.

"But it will be the last time; I shall never, never appeal to him again!"

She arrived at his rooms at four o'clock in the afternoon, the hour when he would be due to come in from his last lecture.

The Pennsylvania Dutch landlady of the house, a red-faced woman of ample proportions, recognized her as the young girl who, over a year ago, had helped "Mr. Sidney" buy and place the lovely furniture for his study. So she readily consented to let her wait for him there.

"You're his sister, mebbby? Or his cousin—ain't?" she asked curiously as she unlocked the door of the study and stood aside to let Susan pass in.

But Susan did not answer. For the fact that jumped at her and struck her in the face the moment she crossed the threshold of Sidney's study, made her speechless.

The furniture which she and Sidney had bought (which she was still paying for in installments out of her salary as the village teacher) was not here; not one piece of it. It had all been replaced with the cheap oak suit which had been here in the beginning and which Sidney had so loathed that it had made him bitter.

"But this is not Mr. Houghton's room," she faltered, turning to Mrs. Eschbach.

"Yes, it is hisn; only it ain't so grand no more, since he sold all his nice furn-shure he used to have in here. Didn't he tell you," asked Mrs. Eschbach, following Susan into the room, her curiosity fairly radiating from all her large person, "how he got so hard up he had to sell his furn-shure?"

"No," Susan managed to answer with dry lips.

"Yes, he couldn't afford to keep it no more. You see, it had cost awful expensive and I think it fetched a good price when he sold it. But och," she added, sympathetically, "it went so hard with him to part with it! He's so much fur havin' things grand around him, that way."

"When did he—how long ago did he—sell it?" Susan asked, scarcely above a whisper.

"Well, he done it graj-ally; one piece at a time just as he needed the money, till it was all sold a'ready."

A wild hope rose in Susan's breast that perhaps *this* was all that was keeping Sidney away from her—embarrassment because of money difficulties; he was so unpractical and foolish about money! Oh, if this were indeed all that was alienating him!

"You see," Mrs. Eschbach explained, "he's in so thick with the new college President's daughter, and she's sich a rich swell, he's just got to spend on her to keep in with her. Fur a-plenty of others would run with her if he didn't. So he's got to spend on her."

Susan sank limply into the nearest chair.

"It's a pity he ain't a rich young man—ain't?—sich tony friends as he runs with and sich taste as he's got fur grandness! Och, but he hates this here common furn-shure I had to put back here when he sold hisn! But I tol' him it ain't reasonable fur him to expect no better fur as cheap rent as what he pays yet. Nor it *ain't*, either."

"Do you think he will come in soon?" asked Susan, faintly.

"Mebby he will and again mebbly he won't. You can't never count on him fur nothin' since he's been runnin' with that there Miss Beresford."

"I'll wait for him."

"All right. When he does come in I'll right aways tell him you're here," said Mrs. Eschbach, kindly. "You ain't lookin' just so hearty."

"Please don't tell him I'm here—I—want to surprise him."

"All right. *Ain't* you his cousin or sister or what?"

"No. Just his——"

Susan hesitated; should she tell this woman that she was Sidney's promised wife?

"Just—a friend of his," she concluded.

"A friend?" repeated Mrs. Eschbach, dubiously. "Say," she added, tentatively, "it's put out all over this here town that him and Miss Beresford's promised to each other."

"Is it?" Susan feebly smiled. "But I think that must be only gossip, Mrs. Eschbach. I have not heard of it and I am a—a very close friend of Mr. Houghton's."

"Yes, he used to have your pitcher on his bureau settin'. I don't know what's become of that there pitcher; I ain't seen it this good whiles back a'ready. So you don't believe it that him and her's promised?"

"No."

"Well, I must say she ain't the wife I'd pick out for *my* son. She's too much all fur herself that way. They say it got her so spoilt, havin' her own big fortune that she inherited off of her gran'pop, her mom bein' dead. Her mom was a old school friend of Mr. Sidney's mom, and as soon as President Beresford got his job at the college here (he's the new President) Mrs. Houghton she come on to wisit her son and interdooced him to Miss Beresford, her old friend's daughter, you understand. And now Mrs. Houghton she's that tickled at the way them two young folks takes to each other. To be sure, it certainly is wery nice fur Mr. Sidney, him bein' so hard up and Miss Beresford her bein' so good-fixed. They say she's awful rich in her own right."

Mrs. Eschbach paused after this long speech, to

get her breath, her huge bosom heaving asthmatically.

Susan, sitting rigid, made no comment.

"Here's her pitcher on his bureau settin'," the landlady added when she had recovered a bit. "Want to take a look?" she asked, starting across the floor.

But she was checked by the sound of the sudden opening of the front door in the hall below.

She turned back to Susan, whose face, at the sound, had gone deadly white.

"It's him," Mrs. Eschbach announced, making for the door as steps came bounding up the stairs, accompanied by gay and noisy whistling.

Susan's hand clutched her breast—that he could be joyously whistling when her heart was breaking!

"You're got comp'ny, Mister Sidney," Mrs. Eschbach informed him, on the threshold of his room.

"Have I?" he brightly answered, stepping back to let her pass out, then entering the room, smiling.

Susan's burning eyes, the only living part of her colourless face, met his smiling glance.

At sight of her, the smile disappeared; the blood mounted to his forehead; he sank into a chair in front of her.

Susan did not speak. She would leave it all to him—to explain himself.

"Well?" he began, defensively, almost aggressively.

"How do you do?" she said, pleasantly, her voice as soft as velvet.

Sidney, at all times peculiarly sensitive to the modulations of a woman's voice, had always thought Susan's the most pleasing voice he had ever heard. It had been many weeks since its music had charmed him, and now it suddenly stirred his pulse as he had not supposed Susan could ever stir it again.

"Why did you come here, Susanna?" he asked, huskily.

"Aren't you pleased to see me, dear?" she asked, almost coquettishly.

"Of course—but what's the idea?"

"By the way, what's become of my—our furniture, dear?"

"Susanna!" he exclaimed, a deeper colour dyeing his face, his tone ashamed and apologetic. "I'll not rest until I have paid you back every dollar that that furniture cost us!"

"Cost us?" But before you begin to pay me, dear, please pay the dealer, to whom I'm still paying, as you know, fifteen dollars a month. I still owe him one hundred dollars of the three hundred which the furniture cost—me. Will you take over that debt of one hundred dollars?"

"Of course I shall. You must not pay another dollar of it!"

"All right," she quietly agreed, folding her hands in her lap, "I won't."

She said nothing more. He waited. But, her friendly glance resting upon him peacefully (while her heart beat suffocatingly), she also waited.

"I never meant to sell the furniture, Susanna," he began, miserably, "but I——"

"Oh, you sold it?" she asked as he floundered.

"Yes," he admitted, his eyes falling, unable to meet hers:

"All of it?"

"To the last piece! But I shall pay you back! Every dollar of it! It may take me a long time, but I shan't let you lose what you paid for it, Susanna!"

"Really?"

"Please, Susanna! Of course I know how the thing must look to you——"

"Why did you sell it? Didn't you like it any more, dear?"

"I know you'll find it hard to forgive me! I needed money, Susanna."

"What for, Sidney?"

"For my running expenses. Mother, you see, is a rather luxurious person and so am I, and the fact is, our income isn't big enough for our needs."

"Didn't you think about consulting me before you sold my—our furniture?"

"Susanna!" he said, abjectly, his head bowed like a guilty child's.

"I shall hardly be able, Sidney, to buy *another* austere; I worked so long to earn money enough for what I did buy. We shall have to marry without much furniture. Mother and Father and my sisters will think that a disgrace. But then, we need not tell them, need we? We may as well spare their feelings."

Sidney glanced at her uneasily; then his eyes fell again; he could not meet her clear gaze.

"When are we to be married, Sydney?"

"I—I don't know."

"You finish here in two months. What are your plans?"

"I have none. That is, no definite plans—I——"

"Yes?" she urged, as he paused.

"It would be years before I earned enough to support you, Susanna."

"The diplomatic appointment—won't your uncle get it for you?"

"Not if I married you, Susanna!"

"The only thing left for you to do, then, Sidney, is to work up a law practice and I shall go on teaching until you are able to support your—your family."

"I've no intention whatever of displeasing Uncle George and living like a beggar!"

"Then what do you propose to do?"

"Keep in Uncle George's good graces."

"But how?—seeing that I am your promised wife, Sidney."

"My—promised—wife?" he repeated, slowly, dubiously.

"More than that—I *am* your wife."

Sidney's feelings at this moment were a strangely conflicting medley. Susanna had not ceased to be extremely attractive to him. Her hold upon his imagination as well as upon his heart was still so strong that no other woman would ever mean quite so much to him. But having somewhat sated his passion for her, it no longer outmeasured his worldly ambition, as it had done at first.

The somewhat abnormal selfishness of his character usually took the form of disliking rather spitefully any person or thing that blocked his desires. Susan, as the one great obstacle to a marriage which would be in every way highly advantageous to him, to a girl of beauty, distinction, wealth, and position, to whom he was also greatly attracted, who would more than satisfy Uncle George's severe standards; Susan as the woman in whose heart he knew he stood revealed as a cad, a liar, a scoundrel, whose respect he had valued and whose scorn stung him to the quick and filled him with self-contempt; Susan had now become to him a thorn in the flesh, an irritant that he would ruthlessly tear out and cast off. For his own gratification and comfort were always to Sidney paramount to every other consideration. In this riot of conflicting emotions then—on the one side, remorse, compassion, attraction, conscience; on the other, ambition, family pride, love of ease and luxury, impatient irritation and anger at the whole situation—Sidney stood bewildered, his self-control shaken, the evil feelings in his heart getting the better of him.

"Susanna! Can't you see that my feelings have changed?"

It stabbed him to see how white she looked as, after an instant, she answered, "It's too late to consider that now. I am your wife."

"I never dreamed that *you* would try to hold a man against his will!"

"You've never gone through the formality of asking me to release you. You wrote to me not to imagine that you had changed; not to grow 'hysterical' at your neglect."

"I was trying to let you down easily."

"Easily?"

"Of course it's awfully hard on both of us!"

"Let me down to *what*?"

"To the fact that I cannot marry you, Susan."

"Why not?"

"I could never love any woman enough to suffer poverty for her."

"But we *are* married! You know how you persuaded me that the mere marriage ceremony meant nothing to such a 'holy relation' as yours and mine!"

"To bring up all that trumpery spoken in the heat of passion, and try to use it to force my hand! Where is your *pride*, Susan?"

"In your keeping, Sidney. I put my pride into your care and keeping when I gave you myself!" she said, piteously.

For an instant he was silenced, his eyes again down-cast.

But the situation was critical; he dared not soften. The moment had come (so long delayed) when he must fight it out.

"Since I no longer feel as I did, you would be *willing* to marry me?" he asked, incredulously.

"Very unwilling. But you and I have no longer

any choice about it; we've gone too far. *I am your wife!*"

"You were my mistress, Susan."

He saw her hand, resting on the arm of her chair, tighten its clasp until the knuckles showed white.

"You see, that's just the point," he hastened to say. "A gentleman," with the faintest possible emphasis on the word, "doesn't marry his mistress."

"Nor keep his word?"

"Love promises! Who ever remembers them or considers them binding? The mother of my possible daughters cannot be the woman who has been my mistress."

It sounded cruelly convincing even to himself. But her answer came swiftly.

"I'd prefer the father of my possible sons to be a man of honour. But it's too late for us to select our children's parents now."

"Oh, no, it's not."

"Yes. That's what brought me here to-day. You and I must be married *at once*. For, Sidney, I am with child. Our child will be born in July."

There was a deathlike stillness in the room for a moment. Sidney looked utterly confounded; utterly helpless before a situation that seemed to have got out of his hands.

"Oh, Susanna! You poor girl!" he stammered.

Then suddenly, seeing himself trapped, his bright prospects destroyed, himself condemned to privation and hard labour, Sidney's pity for himself killed the compassion which for a moment he had felt for the woman who would drag him down from the sunny heights in which he had for weeks past been basking, and would force him to drudge for her in obscurity and deprivation.

"But why have you *let* such a thing happen?" he burst out. "I trusted to your prudence not to get

me (and yourself) into a wretched hole like this! The low vulgarity of it! It will ruin me! *Ruin me!*"

"It's not of ourselves that you and I may think now. We dare not wrong our child! We are not *going* to wrong it! Understand me, Sidney, I am going to protect it! It is not for myself that I am here with you to-day. But my child is going to have a father, a name, a home!"

The cold fear that clutched Sidney's heart at her words made him brutal.

"This is, I suppose, the way girls of your class manage these matters, in order to make *sure* of marriage?"

"And how do gentlemen of your class manage them?" she asked, calmly. "Don't make yourself ridiculous, Sidney. But be quite clear on this point—*my child is going to be protected.*"

"What good would marriage do *now*—to you or me or the child? It's too late. If you had told me of this as soon as you knew of it! But now? Marriage at this late stage won't save you and will only disgrace me! I won't consent to it!"

"You'll have to. I'll make you. Not only for the sake of our child, but for my dear ones at home that have sacrificed so much for me—I won't let disgrace and sorrow come to them through me—and you. You and I are going to be married. We need not live together. But *we are going to be married.*"

"We are not! I would not marry you now if——"

There was a knock on the half-open door. Sidney started up; but before he could reach it, the door was thrown wide, and Miss Laura Beresford, in sporting golf attire, stood revealed at the threshold. Susan, sitting just inside the door, was not directly in her line of vision.

"I've been honking and *honking* for you, Sid! Didn't you hear me? Oh! Not even dressed yet!"

she exclaimed, fretfully. "We shall be too late for the game! Why didn't you phone if you weren't going to keep your engagement?" she demanded, indignantly.

And then, all at once she became conscious of Sidney's pallor and agitation; she cast a quick glance about the room and her eye fell upon Susan just inside the door.

"Why! What's the matter? What——"

Susan suddenly rose and came forward, smiling, with outstretched hand.

"*This* is 'Laura,' surely? I've been hearing so much about you!—how good you've been to dear Sidney and what splendid times you've been having together! And what good friends your two mothers have always been! It has been so kind of you to keep dear Sidney from growing dull when I couldn't be here with him; I can't tell you how much I appreciate it—your keeping him from moping for *me*! He's just been telling me he wants you to be my maid of honour. You shall be the first to congratulate us, Laura (if I may call you that). We are to be married next week."

She was standing at Sidney's side, and as she spoke, she clasped her arms about his neck and leaned against his breast. He, rigid, white as chalk, his tragic-comic look of despair and dismay, of being hopelessly caught, brought to Miss Beresford's lips a curve of contempt that added not a little to his agony.

But now, suddenly, without warning, Susan's hold upon him relaxed, her arms fell to her sides, she slipped to the floor and lay in a little heap at his feet—as still and white as death.

CHAPTER IV

A YEAR LATER

SUSAN had quite formed a habit, of late, of taking the precaution, at the end of her day's work in her school-room, to peep from the window to see whether the coast were clear so that she could go forth without danger of being joined on the way home by her objectionable suitor, Joe Houghton, who lived and worked just across the road from her new school, at his uncle's famous old homestead, White Oak Farm; or by some adoring pupil who might be lingering about to walk to the trolley station with her, as some among the older boys and girls were apt to do. The sentimental girls were even more trying than the big, blushing, silent boys. There had been a time, ages and ages ago, when she had loved all her pupils quite maternally and had been so humbly grateful for their devotion to her! But now, she only wanted to be let alone; to keep to herself. It was almost the only desire she had left; for all capacity for feeling anything, except weariness and listlessness, seemed to have died within her.

She had shrunk from the return of the spring, the anniversary of her great tragedy, lest its old exhilarating effect upon her might bring back her power to feel, to suffer. But it did not stir a drop of her blood; her heart remained like lead in her breast; as though some tension had snapped, leaving her soul a dead weight.

The new school position which she had secured this year was at White Oak Station, a hamlet eight miles from her home, in a neighbourhood in which she had been quite unacquainted.

To-day when she peeped from the school-room window to reconnoitre, there was not, as far as she could see, a single boy, girl, or man in sight.

Joe Houghton, however, could not be depended upon to give her fair warning by exposing himself to view; her constant efforts to elude him had only made him cunning in his pursuit of her. So, in letting herself out of the school-house door, she moved cautiously, without noise, and instead of taking the public road, crept like a burglar around to the back of the little building, intending to cross a field to another road which would add a half mile to her walk to the trolley station. She knew that by doing this she ran the risk of missing her trolley car home and of being obliged to wait an hour for the next one. That, however, would not be so wearisome as Joe Houghton's company on the long mile to the station.

She reached the back of the school-house unobserved, she was sure, and as, with a sigh of relief at her escape, she turned toward the adjoining field, there in front of her, scowling at her, stood Joe Houghton!

He was not quite forty years of age, but from overwork his tall, bony frame was stooped like an old man's. His gaunt face was tanned and his hands red and rough. His countenance, though not evil, was usually sulky when not actually scowling. The most objectionable thing about him in Susan's eyes was the way his false teeth wriggled about, "as though," she thought, "they didn't want to stay on the job!"

As a concession to the fact that he was come a-courting, he wore his best (and only) suit: of cheap

material and bad cut; and a brilliant lavender necktie that he had bought at Woolworth's.

Joe Houghton was reputed to have amassed a very comfortable bank account; but money to him was not what the dictionary proclaims it, "a medium of exchange"; he never exchanged it for anything if he could help it. The one great dissipation of his whole life was the accumulation and hoarding of wealth.

"That's the time I caught you; ain't?" he said, pointing an accusing finger at Susan as she stopped short at sight of him. His words were playful, but his tone and look were sullen.

Without answering, she turned and walked back to the front of the school-house to take the main road.

Joe, however, kept at her side.

"What the hell makes you ac' so menschenshy*, anyhow, Miss Susie?" he demanded.

She walked rapidly, without replying.

"Say, Miss Susan, I got somepin awful particular to tell you this after!" he pleaded.

"But you've had my answer so often," she said, wearily. Though her voice had lost none of its sweetness and drawling softness, it was lifeless.

"No, I ain't had your answer a'ready!" growled Joe. "You ain't said *Yes* yet; and *Yes* is a-goin' to be your answer! You make up your mind to that!"

"You seem to have made up *your* mind so firmly," she said, sweetly, "that my mind doesn't seem to matter."

"Well, anyhow, it ain't *that* question I want to bother you with this after. It's somepin else I got reference to."

Susan manifested no curiosity.

"Somepin awful important to me *and* you," he added.

*Bashful with men.

"That doesn't seem possible," said Susan, mildly.

"You mean," said Joe, frowning with the mental effort to which this retort challenged him, "that me and you ain't *got* no interests in common?"

"I've not noticed any."

"Well, you'll notice 'em some day, you bet you! It's about my Uncle George's will I want to tell you. I went to Middleburg yistiddy to tend the reading of the will. *That's* some important to you, ain't it?"

"Why should it be?"

"Because some day what's mine will be yourn."

"But if *you* were mine, I should certainly wish, for your immortal soul's sake, that your Uncle George had died a bankrupt!"

Joe, to whom money was a holy thing, his only religion, felt cold at such blasphemy.

"It's temptin' Providence to say sich things!" he frowned.

"Can 'Providence' be tempted? What a funny expression it is, by the way—"tempting Providence! Religion sometimes seems to me the most humorous thing in all the world!"

"Och, don't talk so outlandish!" he brusquely admonished her. Joe, like Mark Antony, was "no orator," but "a plain, blunt man," who did not stand on ceremony. "Don't you want fur me to tell you about Uncle George's will?"

"Why should I?"

"Say, what makes you ac' so ugly to me? Don't I treat you right?"

"As right as you know how, Mr. Houghton."

"Well, I can't do better'n that, can I?"

"No—that's the trouble."

"You mean," he demanded with puckered brow, "that I don't know how to treat a lady right?"

"You're so bright, Mr. Houghton, in seeing through my remarks!"

"Yes," said Joe, complacently, "I always was wery smart that way. But I guess you mean," he added, suspiciously, "that I ain't tony enough to suit you."

"You don't have to suit me."

"But you got to suit *me*! And you got to take interest in Uncle George's will. Uncle George done awful mean by me! What do you think he up and done yet, Miss Susan? He's inherited to my half-brother, Sidney, this here farm here, that I've worked on like a dog for five years, improvin' the land so much that I've near doubled the crops! And now the whole place of twelve hundred waluable acres, with house and all, goes to Sid and I got to get *out*!—and lose all the profits of my own work! Yes, anyhow! The will says Sid's got to come here and make White Oak Farm his home and keep up the place, because seven generations of Houghtons has lived here. Sid he's to be sich a gentleman farmer, the will says. Now what do you think of that? Ain't it dirty mean that I got to get off my farm?"

Susan could almost have found it in her heart to pity the man at her side for the tragic suffering she knew this fact meant to him.

"I'm sorry!" she said, sympathetically.

"The will inherits to Sid (besides White Oak Farm) two thirds of the estate worth near a million, and to me only one third," complained Joe. "To be sure," he admitted, "it ain't as if I hadn't of expected Sid to get the big share; but I did think Uncle George would give the *farm* to me that I've worked on so hard! But my folks always did have it in fur me! None of 'em ever did think I was good enough fur 'em to 'sociate with!—though it's them that always kep' me down. My father left me run wild when I was little and never bothered about me; and then when he married again, my step-mother she had so ashamed of me, she was all the time pokin' me out of sight when—

ever she had comp'ny. She'd make me eat in the kitchen with the hired help and she wouldn't never speak to me. Her and Sid and Uncle George, all of 'em, had always ashamed of me. And my father *he* didn't care!"

Joe spoke with exceeding bitterness, and for the first time in her acquaintance with him, Susan found herself feeling some sympathy for him.

"One thing in that there will," he continued, "ain't so bad fur me, fur all. If Sid's son dies——"

"He has a son?"

"Yes," answered Joe on a deep tragic note that made Susan vaguely wonder. "And if his kid dies, White Oak Farm goes to *my* son, so's the family name'll be kep' on at the ol' homestead."

Susan whimsically reflected that Joe was quite incapable of plotting the heir's murder for the sake of his own son's inheritance. "It must take rather heroic courage to commit some kinds of crime!" she thought. "And only debased cowardice for the kind Sidney committed!"

"Now my half-brother, Sidney, he's altogether different to what I am yet," Joe went on. "He's a elegant swell, Sid is," he sneered. "From a little kid a'ready, he was always awful genteel. You'd never take him fur my brother, Miss Susan, if you ever met up with him; which you're likely to do soon, fur he's comin' here right aways to White Oak to live at the ol' homestead."

Susan's detached self, which seemed, in these days, always to be looking on, with a dull surprise, at her dead other self, noticed, just now, how strangely unmoved this news found her. Joe might have been speaking (as he supposed he was) of someone she had never seen!

"Sid, he kep' on the right side of Uncle George by marryin' awful good; a wery tony swell with money

of her own. A perfec' lady, so they say. I never seen her. She must be, though, if she satisfied Uncle George's elegant tastes! Gosh, but Sid'll be ashamed to have to interdooce her to *me*!"

Susan made no comment as they walked side by side over the country highroad in the warm, bright April afternoon, past woods and fields just beginning to show a down of tender green.

"Well, ain't it a dirty, mean shame, me havin' to get off my farm fur my stuck-up half-brother to move in, that never done a stroke of work on the place; nor nowheres else did he never do no work of no kind!"

"I wonder," the young school teacher found her brain speculating, "whether he *could* get any more negatives into that sentence!"

"Sid *he* can't make good on the farm; he don't know nothin' about farmin'. He don't know nothin' about nothin', except the rules of society and stylish clo'es and how to squander money and such like. He even fell down on that there dead easy cinch Uncle George got him—diplomacy—in Europe. Got all balled up tryin' to work it! His wife didn't hit it off good with a dukess or a czaress or whatever. Anyhow, the two of 'em (Mrs. Sid and the dukess or what) had words and Sid he had to cut out and come home."

Susan laughed—a little low ripple of quite mirthless laughter.

"What's so funny?" asked Joe, puzzled. "Sid's mom and Uncle George took it awful serious. Me, too, fur if he'd stayed over there on his job, I might of stayed on the farm. *Don't* you think they done me dirt?"

"It's not right," Susan answered, perfunctorily. "It's not right (in fact, it's quite grotesque) that a man, after he's dead, should control twelve hundred acres of the earth's surface, decreeing to whom it shall

belong for two generations. It's not right that your step-brother, who does not work, should reap where others sow. It's not right that a third of a million dollars that you never worked for should fall into your hands, while my valuable services in this township are paid for at fifty dollars a month! I'm afraid, Mr. Houghton, I can't get warmed up over your wrongs. Are you going to move away?" she asked, hopefully.

"Not if I can help it—don't you worry!"

"I'll try not to."

"I'm in hopes Sid'll hire me fur his tenant-farmer and leave me live in the tenant-farmer's cottage on the place and keep on workin' the farm on shares fur him, like what I done fur Uncle George. I don't believe he will, though. He'd hate so to have a brother like me," Joe growled, "livin' close by, so's he'd have to interdooce me, still, if I chanced along, to his grand friends!"

Susan noted, without any great interest in the phenomenon, the strange psychology of the born miser who, with ample means to go where he would, preferred to work slavishly for a brother who looked down upon him, rather than lose the few thousand dollars, the fruits of his own labour which, in the transfer of the property, would accrue to his brother instead of to him.

"Sid'll soon find out that a good, honest farmer ain't so easy found," said Joe. "So mebby he'll *have* to leave me stay on."

It was not, Susan knew, that Joe was without pride or sensitiveness, of a kind. But these sentiments were overborne by his avarice.

His next words, however, made her doubt whether avarice was the only or the strongest motive he had for wishing to remain where he was not wanted.

"I want to be Johnny-on-the-spot to watch Sid

'waste his substance in riotous living,'" he chuckled, maliciously. "Till ten years a'ready *he* won't have no money left of all his big fortune. I know him. He'll blow it in! I tell you," he said, wickedly gloating, "you'll see the day when my swell brother comes to me beggin' fur the price of a meal ticket. Then watch what *I'll* do! And say! it won't go so long, neither, till I get him in my power!"

"In your power!" smiled Susan, skeptically. It sounded so melodramatic.

"You needn't to grin! I got my little plans all right, all right!"

Susan was silent.

"One good thing, Miss Susan, you won't have near the housework to do, us livin' in the tenant's cottage, as what you'd of had if White Oak Farm had of been willed to me and I'd of stayed on in the big house. My housekeeper she's always growlin' about how much work it makes in such a big house, even though we do close off all but just the couple rooms we use. Yes, me, I'll be awful glad when I got a wife oncet and don't have to fuss with no hired help no more."

"Won't it be worse to have to fuss with a wife? You can't discharge your wife as you can your hired housekeeper."

"But my first wife, she never bothered me any about the housework bein' too heavy. And a man's wife can't up and leave like hired help's always doin'."

"Oh, yes, she can, in these days. A few do."

"Not the kind of a woman *I'll* marry," said ~~Jon~~ Jon, confidently. "I wouldn't tie up with no sich loose-moralled person."

"See that you don't!"

"*You* don't hold no sich loose views, do you? Don't you think marriage is awful sakerd?"

"Sacred to become a man's permanent housekeeper who can't throw up her job if she doesn't like it? Sacred? Ha!" Susan laughed—almost with amusement.

"A wife's a man's partner," argued Joe.

"His equal partner? With some rights over their earnings and property?"

"Well, to be sure, the husband's the head of the wife. The *Bible* says so. You believe the Bible, don't you?"

"I don't believe nonsense."

"Oh, hell, Miss Susan, ain't you afraid somepin'll happen you, sayin' sich blasphemous things?"

Susan thought to herself, "Afraid?—of something happening to me?—when everything *has* happened that can ever matter!"

But when Joe Houghton had left her at the station and she was alone, during her long hour's ride home to Reifsville, she found that his announcement of his brother's immediately coming to live in the neighbourhood of her school did seem to matter to her. She had suffered so horribly; her present insensibility was such a blessed respite; she dreaded so unspeakably any possible thing which might revive her pain! Could she remain as callous at sight of Sidney Houghton as everything else had found her since the birth of her dead baby?

It was just one year ago to-day that she had gone to her lover's rooms to plead with him for their coming child. And three days after that futile visit to him she had read the newspaper announcement of his sudden marriage to Miss Laura Beresford.

Then for two days and nights she had suffered the prolonged torture of a tedious and terribly difficult premature child-birth.

She had never seen her dead baby. She had been unconscious at its birth; and for many weeks after-

ward she had lain at death's door in the delirium of child-bed fever.

When, after long, dreary, hopeless weeks of illness and suffering, she had become strong enough to ask questions about the baby, the answers of her shocked and stricken family had seemed to her strange, evasive. Her sister Addie had told her it was a girl; her mother, tearfully, but with a note of heart-broken pride, that it was "a fine boy"; Lizzie that it was "a seven months' blue baby and couldn't have lived anyhow." That enigmatical "anyhow" had vaguely troubled her through all her convalescence.

"Just to think," Addie would mourn as she waited upon her, "that a man with such nice manners at him as what Sidney always had, would go and ac' like this here! Don't it beat all? I wouldn't of thought it of him! How he must have ashamed of hisself now!"

"*Him* ashamed!" Lizzie would sniff. "Nothing doing! He ain't the pertikkler *kind*!"

Susan's deepest bitterness against her "betrayer" lay in the fact that she must be thankful that her baby was dead; that she, whose longing for a child had been a passion, had been cheated of its fulfilment; that the ecstasy which her child would have been to her had been turned into a frenzy of horror lest her coming baby should be alive!—born "out of wedlock"; an outcast; her innocent child made to suffer all its life long because of its parents' selfishness and weakness! That her motherhood had been thus perverted and distorted—for this she knew that never while she breathed could she forgive Sidney Houghton.

It did not seem very strange to her that Miss Beresford, in spite of that encounter with her at Sidney's rooms, had, after all, married him.

"It isn't very much worse than what I did for love of him! And of course he lied to her about me."

Strangely enough, the Schrekengusts' desperate efforts to conceal their darling's "disgrace" had been successful. A doctor had been "fetched" from another town and they themselves had been her only nurses. The very length and severity of her illness had precluded any suspicion in Reifsville as to its true cause, especially as no least rumour of scandal had been previously aroused.

The consternation produced in the family by Susan's inquiry, as soon as she was able to walk out of doors, for the grave of her baby, had revealed to her poignantly how deeply her family felt her "ruin."

"But we didn't give you away to folks by makin' a grave yet to show!" her father had explained to her. "Nobody knows nothing! Nor they *ain't* to, neither!"

"Didn't you have an undertaker?"

"Och, no," her mother had sadly told her. "Pop he tended to all hisself."

"But where did you bury her? I want at least to go to the spot where she lies!" Susan had pleaded (the consensus of opinion seeming to favour the assumption, in lieu of any positive statement, that the baby had been a girl).

"I couldn't say just the spot," her father had replied, "but—well, it's anyhow in the orchard over."

She knew she was morbid to regret so much that she could not have even the doubtful solace of visiting her child's grave.

Six months had passed before she had been able to take up teaching again. Her position at Reifsville had been filled, and she had secured the country school at White Oak Station.

Joe Houghton being one of the school directors who had elected her, and White Oak Farm being so conveniently just across the road from her school-house, the young widower, with a year-old baby on his

hands, had, from the first hour of their acquaintance, pursued her assiduously with his unwelcome attentions.

Susan realized, with an utter indifference to the fact, that she had come out from her illness much better looking than she had ever been; her abundant hair, all lost through her terrible fever, had come in again in thick gold-brown curls; her wasted flesh seemed to have been renewed in a clearer, softer texture; all the angles of her slender frame were now softly rounded; she bloomed and glowed with health and youth.

But her soul remained heavy and dead.

She had not taken up again, after her recovery, any of the old threads of her life. The few choice, intimate, and very precious friendships she had made at school had been dropped; forever, she believed. Her friends' letters, persistent, anxious, importunate, remained unanswered. She had ceased to feel any interest in them. They belonged so absolutely to that other life, now dead, in which she had met and known and loved Sidney Houghton; a life so different from that of her own home; in which she had found colour, joy, music, culture, and had made them her own. That was all over now. Sidney had robbed her of everything of worth that she had attained through hard work, against adverse circumstances. She seemed to have lost all power to feel, to care for any one, for anything.

She had found Joe Houghton to be all that Sidney had once told her he was—crude, miserly, "grouchy." He was of a very jealous disposition and given to fits of sullenness which made Susan feel that his young wife must have found a blessed escape in death. He was, of course, his own worst enemy, an unhappy creature, his only joy and comfort in life being his passion for hoarding money. He loved his baby boy

and was proud of him, but the child caused him more suffering than happiness; for while he had quarrelled with one housekeeper after another for neglecting the boy, he was morbidly jealous of any one for whom the child manifested more fondness than he showed for his father.

Over against these trying characteristics could be named a few uninteresting virtues. He was scrupulously honest and truthful; much as he loved gain, there was no stake high enough to lure him from the strictest integrity. And although a highly sexed individual, he was quite puritanically virtuous.

Susan thought, during her homeward drive, what an ideal setting for a man of Sidney Houghton's tastes White Oak Farm would be and what delight he would take in that beautiful old home which had been so religiously preserved in all its primitive quaintness of architecture and furniture, by so many generations of his family. He had once told her how the Houghtons had always prided themselves in being the only family of English extraction in all the Pennsylvania Dutch township of White Oak. Their social life had of course (he had explained) been confined exclusively to that of the near-by city of Middleburg. Their immediate neighbourhood knew them only by sight.

Joe had one day persuaded her to come over to the farm to see his baby (little dreaming of the bitterness in her soul as she had held the pretty child on her breast!) and he had shown her all over the truly lovely house, unlocking the closed-off rooms with their old woven rugs brought over to America in colonial days, their carved four-posted beds, pier tables, davenport, and old portraits of colonial dignitaries. As she reflected that all these rare things were now the possession of Sidney Houghton she thought of that one pathetic little suit of furniture

which she and Sidney had chosen together for their future home and which he had afterward pawned in order to carry on his courtship with Miss Laura Beresford—even while she, Susan, was still paying for it out of her hard-earned little salary.

“Did he know at the time,” she dully wondered, “that we would never use it in a home of ours? Did he get me to buy it just for his own use in his college rooms?”

He had not kept the promise he had made to her about the furniture—that day she had gone to him to plead with him for their child’s sake——

“I shall pay you back every dollar of it!” he had said. “It may take me a long time, but I shan’t let you lose what you paid for it, Susan.”

When, during her illness, several letters had come to her, dunning her for the sum still unpaid on the furniture, her father had given Sidney Houghton’s address to the creditor and told him to collect the amount from him. But the creditor had returned the information that Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Houghton were in Denmark and that Mr. Houghton’s mother repudiated the bill.

The furniture had been bought in Susan’s name. So, when she was recovered from her long illness, she sold her parlour furniture to be able to meet this debt and her large doctor’s bill.

When this afternoon she got off the trolley car and walked listlessly through Reifsville toward her home, she was still wondering whether a possible, and probably unavoidable, encounter with the new occupant of White Oak Farm would shock her back into sensibility.

CHAPTER V

FACE TO FACE

ALTHOUGH Susan's family treated her "ruin" (as they technically labelled her unlegalized motherhood) with all sympathy and tenderness, it blighted their simple lives as nothing else could possibly have done. Her father seemed to have become aged and feeble over night, her sisters permanently depressed, her mother crushed. In spite of the fact that they had been able to conceal their disgrace, Mr. Schrekengust, on the plea of advancing feebleness, resigned his office of preacher to the Mennonite congregation. The Mennonite sect does not consist of clergy and laymen; any member of a congregation may at any time be elected to serve as the preacher; and if so elected he is obliged to serve, whatever his fitness—or unfitness. He receives no salary for "doing God's work," and his office as preacher never interferes with his secular occupation, which is generally farming. Mr. Schrekengust, whose experience and knowledge of life were unbelievably limited, had once by accident met a prominent Episcopal clergyman and, unaware that preaching was, in any denomination, a bread-winning occupation, he had inquired of the Episcopalian, "What do you work at?"

"I'm a clergyman of the Episcopal Church."

"But what do you *work*?"

The Episcopalian, recalling that Mennonites do not have an ordained ministry and knowing how

shocked this preacher would be if told that any man worked at nothing *else* than preaching (and not very hard at that), replied, "Well—I—I fish a little."

Mr. Schrekengust was a "trucker," but his place at the edge of Reifsville was not only very small, but had been so heavily mortgaged to pay for Susan's education that his earnings were now quite insufficient for the support of his family without the aid of Susan's salary and the assistance given him on his little farm by his two elder daughters, who saved him the expense of a hired man. And now that he was becoming day by day more and more feeble, the family realized, as the spring advanced, that he was utterly unable to cope with the heavy work of the farm. They would either have to hire a farmer, to whom Mr. Schrekengust would give some slight assistance, or they would have to sell their already heavily mortgaged land. Either alternative would leave them with almost no income.

It was Joe Houghton, Susan learned from her father, to her surprise and somewhat to her consternation, who now held the mortgage against their land; the neighbour from whom Mr. Schrekengust had borrowed money some years ago to send Susan to school had sold out his claim to Joe.

Susan knew how ruthless Joe Houghton could be in exacting his own. There had been two instances of families in the neighbourhood of White Oak Farm whose homes he had seized in payment of the interest due him on mortgages.

She decided to broach the subject to him on one of their now almost daily walks from her school to the trolley station. For he had not left the neighbourhood with the advent of the new owner of White Oak Farm. His half-brother had reluctantly consented to his continuing to farm the place on shares and to

is occupying the tenant-farmer's cottage, where, in fact, Joe was now very cosily established with his baby and a new housekeeper.

"I shouldn't have supposed he'd let you stay here!" Susan had met the information with surprise. It isn't like him!"

"Why, how do *you* know what's like him and what in't?" Joe had quickly inquired.

"I judge from all you've told me of him," she hastily explained. "What is his reason for letting you stay?"

"You judged right!" growled Joe. "He has a reason—and a good one—or out I'd have to *git*!"

Susan did not repeat her inquiry as to what the reason was.

"I got a *hold* on him!" said Joe, darkly. "He arsen't go too far with me!"

Again Susan asked no question. And he volunteered no further information.

"He ain't interdooced his Missus to me yet," Joe shrugged. "But it ain't my loss! I took a good look at her here the other day, and say! If she ain't a sour lookin' as—as you're *sweet* lookin', Missusie! Gee, I'd hate to set acrost the dinner table 'om a winegar face like hern every day! And her baby—why, it's all the time with that there coloured ired girl. Its mom ain't never got it, fur as I kin see."

On rainy days Joe invariably took Susan to herrolley car in his little gasoline car; but on clear days the car was never forthcoming, and Susan had come to welcome the sight of rain, which prevented those long walks with her suitor, during every minute of which she was dreading a chance meeting on the road with Sidney, who was now established at White Oak Farm with his wife and baby and a retinue of servants.

"Joe would expect to introduce his brother to me if we met," she reflected, shudderingly.

She knew, of course, that at the faintest suspicion, on the part of any school director, of her true story, she would lose her position—which was now the only certain income of her family—and that Joe Houghton, who was the president of the school board, would, from personal chagrin, prove the most implacable of them all. Therefore, if a meeting between her and Sidney was inevitable, it must not be in the presence of Joe.

Thus far she had not caught so much as a glimpse of Sidney though she had several times seen his wife drive by the school-house in her great car, with a liveried chauffeur; and every day she saw the baby being wheeled about the grounds by an untidy-looking Negro nurse.

She wondered whether Sidney was aware of her daily presence in the neighbourhood; and if he were, whether, in his prosperity and security, it affected in the least his serenity. Of course he did know that the home of the girl he had betrayed and deceived and robbed, the mother of his dead child, was only eight miles distant from his own home. Did *this* fact ever disturb his equanimity?

He had never, so far as she knew, made any inquiries as to whether his child had lived or died.

Joe Houghton did not share Susan's preference for the short ride of rainy days rather than the long walk of clear weather.

"The little automobile she makes so quick, it's too soon over a'ready, Susan. I like better the long walk," he gallantly told her as they were strolling to the station on the day after she had learned that he held the mortgage against her home.

"But I prefer the short ride," she replied. "Don't you think you might consider what I prefer?"

"Och, Miss Susie, you do enjoy takin' a fellah down; ain't you do? But you don't fool me any! I know a coke-wet when I see one! *You* don't mean all you leave on!"

"You see right through me, don't you?"

"You ain't so hard to see through—a straight, virtuous female like you! You ain't like some! You'd be surprised to see how some throws themselves at me fur my fortune! That's what I like about you—you leave *me* do the courtin'! And," he added, feelingly, "you're as refined and pure a wirgin as you otherwise can be! Och, yes, me I see through you like readin' a book."

"Ha!" came Susan's little mocking laugh with, to-day, an added note of bitterness that strangely thrilled Joe's nerves.

"Mr. Houghton!"

"Make it Joe, can't you? What?"

"Father told me last night that it is you who hold the mortgage against us."

"Not against *you*—I wisht I did!" he retorted, facetiously. "You'd see how quick I'd foreclose oncet!"

"Will you be very kind to us and buy our place for a little more than it is worth?" said Susan, boldly.

"I never pay more for nothing than what it's worth. I'll tell you what I'll do, though. The day you say Yes to me, I'll buy in that there prop'ty and give your pop a clean deed to it! It'll be my weddin' present to you. I'd have to buy you a weddin' present anyhow—you'd expect it; so we'll leave it go at that. Think it over!"

"Are you offering to buy me?"

"Well, if I can't git you no other way! You certainly won't never git no *better* chanct."

Susan thought how shaken his complacency with

regard to her would be if he could know that she considered him the very worst possible "chance."

"I'm not up for sale yet, Mr. Houghton, though I don't know how low I may yet sink."

"You'd call it sinkin' low to marry me?" Joe demanded, aggrieved.

"Low to sell myself. It seems to me a much lower thing to marry for money than to give yourself freely, outside of marriage, for love."

"Say, Miss Susan, if you'd get off them funny things you say sometimes, to *some* folks, that didn't know what a virtuous girl you are, they'd think *hard* of you! I wisht you'd break yourself of the habit! It's growin' on you! Folks'll talk about you!"

"Good gracious!" breathed Susan, surprised out of herself at being held up for reproof like a child.

"Wouldn't you care if folks talked?" he asked, disapprovingly.

"You're the only person to whom I ever 'get off' my 'funny things'—and you won't talk about me, will you?"

"To be sure you're safe with me; but if you are got the habit of talkin' so reckless, you'll be doin' it in front of someone where it *ain't* safe."

"I can imagine nothing more tame than always to be safe!"

"Och, well, you're young yet and wery high-spirited and I guess I got to make allowance. Oncet you're married to me, you'll settle down."

"Good Lord deliver me then!"

"I'd think school teachin' was safe and tame enough, and you stick to *it* good and steady. So I guess you won't find married life too tame fur you."

"But school teaching isn't safe; it's getting to be one of the most dangerous professions in this country! Much worse than working in a dynamite factory. Why, in some states you can't teach at all until your

opinions have been examined; and after that, if you ever happen to learn something new that might change one of those opinions, you would run the risk of losing your position and your livelihood. And in some states if you join the American Federation of Labour you can't teach in the public schools."

"Good thing, too," declared Joe. "Nothin' more pertikkler than that our teachers of the young should have correct opinions."

"Opinions that our politicians, our state legislators, our country school directors, consider correct! O Lord!"

"Tut, tut! Ain't you 'shamed o' yourself!"

"You've no idea of the depth of my shamelessness!"

"A lady swearin' yet! Tut, tut!"

"I'd cuss from morning to night if it would only make you hate me! I do my very darndest-damndest to make you!"

"There, there!" he said, soothingly. "Calm yourself down, my dear sweet little Spitfire! or you'll get the headache!"

When at last Joe had left her and she was on her homeward ride, she wondered whether he could perhaps have taken over that mortgage against her father's property with the deliberate purpose of bribing, or forcing, her into marrying him! How blind he was! How little he dreamed of the deep disgust she often felt toward him for some of the very things which he considered his highest assets, his most commendable virtues!

For instance, one day when it had been raining hard, he had offered, magnanimously, to drive her the whole way to Reifsville in his automobile instead of just to her trolley car. But when a half mile from Reifsville he had drawn up short just before coming to a toll gate.

"I guess you won't mind walkin' the half mile that's left yet; it'll save me this here ten cents' toll I'd have to pay goin' and comin'."

Susan had got out of his car and Joe had turned it about toward White Oak Farm with a backward grin of cunning at the toll gate keeper disappointed of a dime.

He had never dreamed that this self-denying prudence on his part had sent Susan home with a mingled laughter and loathing which, as long as she lived, she could never forget.

It was a few days later, at recess time, when, having dismissed her pupils to the playground behind the school-house, she was taking a breath of fresh air on the front porch, that she saw at close range Sidney Houghton's little son, as the untidy Negro nurse trundled the baby coach past the school. So carelessly the indifferent maid pushed the little cart over the rough, unpaved road, that Susan, watching her approach, caught her breath in dread of an upset.

"Take care!" she involuntarily called out, as directly in front of the school porch the maid, gaping curiously at the teacher instead of watching where she went, the coach bumped against a stone in the path, tilted, lost balance, and went over.

Susan, rushing to the rescue, stooped to pick up the frightened, crying child, while the nurse, undisturbed, righted the coach and lazily shook the dust from the cushion and robe that had tumbled into the path.

As Susan held the child in her arms, while the nurse arranged the coach, she found to her astonishment, almost to her bewilderment, that instead of a little baby a few months old, she was holding a big, bouncing boy with a strong, upright back; and instead of the vague eyes of a young infant, she found herself

looking into the intelligent, wide-awake face of a child over a year old.

He was a lovely boy, resembling his father so strongly as to seem like a grotesque little image of the man. But there was something else in this little face that had never been in Sidney's—a wistful look, a soul——

The child stopped crying as she held him, looked up into her eyes, smiled, and nestled into her arms so appealingly, so trustfully, that Susan suddenly, unaccountably, felt her soul shaken to its foundations. Her heart beat suffocatingly, and to her own amazement she trembled from head to foot. If merely Sidney's baby could affect her like this, what would it mean to her to meet Sidney himself?

"What is the baby's name?" she asked the nurse after a moment.

"They calls him Georgie."

She noticed that the child's clothing, though of fine quality, was soiled and torn and that his face and hands were unwashed; a very neglected baby.

Again, to her own astonishment, she found herself very tenderly kissing the child as she let him go.

"The roads about here are too rough for a baby coach," she warned the nurse.

"They sure is! And anyhow I has my orders not to take Georgie outside where folks kin see him. But I gets so tired stayin' inside the gates all the time!"

"You are not to let people see him?" asked Susan, wonderingly. "Why? Is there something wrong with him?"

"No, there ain't nothin' wrong with him. I dunno why folks darsen't see him. I guess because he's so awful overgrowed fur his age they're afraid it'll make folks talk."

"How old is he?"

"Six months."

"Why, he is almost as big as Mr. Joe Houghton's baby of seventeen months!"

"Well, but he ain't but six months old," maintained the nurse. "But I guess it *is* because he is so overgrown that his mother and father wants him kep' out of sight."

"To hide such a lovely boy!" breathed Susan, wonderingly, "when one would think they'd be so proud to show him!"

"They ain't proud to show him—no siree! They're awful pertikkler about his not bein' took outside the gates. But I has to git out *sometimes*," repeated the girl, turning the coach about to go back to the farm.

During the rest of that day Susan's pupils found her a very absent-minded teacher. The question kept obtruding itself as to *why* the child of six months should look twice his age and more; and why his father and mother feared to have that fact noted in the neighbourhood. Could it be, she wondered, her breath coming short at the thought, that Sidney had had to choose, a year ago, whether he would make Laura Beresford's baby or hers his legitimate child? Could it be that his hasty marriage to Miss Beresford had been forced upon him?

But he had said to her, that day in his rooms, "A gentleman doesn't marry his mistress!"

Ah, but when at another and earlier time she had put it to him, "Would you ask this thing of me if I were a girl of your mother's choosing—of your own social world?"—he had answered, "Perhaps I should not have to plead so hard with a worldly girl!" (How she remembered every word Sidney had ever spoken to her!)

It suddenly flashed upon her that perhaps Joe Houghton's "hold" upon his brother, of which he had spoken to her, was this secret about the baby born too

disgracefully soon after his marriage! She was quite sure that Joe, to achieve any advantage to himself, would not be above holding over his brother a threat of exposure of a disgrace.

"What a bad breed these Houghtons really are! How strange that a race like this should consider themselves of rarer, finer quality than the common herd!" she marvelled.

That evening, on her way to the station with Joe, she said to him, "I have seen your brother's baby."

"Aha! And what do *you* think of it, heh? Did you see it close up?" he asked with a sinister cunning that made her shrink from his side.

"Yes. It is over a year old."

"Huh! So you seen that, too, did you? That's what *I* knowed the minute I laid eyes on it. I ought to know somepin about babies, havin' one of my own! Why, Georgie's near as big and knowin' as my Josie, and Josie's seventeen months old yet! No, sir, you can't fool me! To be sure, I wouldn't say a word to you, Miss Susan, *about* it if you was an outsider. But this here's all in the family."

"No, it isn't. I am an outsider—and always shall be."

"Och, well, have your little joke as long as you kin. You'll miss it, oncet you're married to me. You'll have to find somepin to take its place—like who's the boss in our tie-up, and all like that—ain't?" he chuckled. "Yes, it's easy seen Sid *had* to git married to that winegar-faced Missus of hisn. A clear case of *must!*"

"I didn't suppose that a gentleman would ever marry his mistress," Susan ventured in a light, casual tone.

"Well, *I* wouldn't marry no woman that held herself that cheap and common, you bet you!—fur all Sid thinks I ain't no gentleman. Nor I don't believe

Sid would have married her neither if she hadn't of had money and been enough of a swell to satisfy Uncle George!"

"What low ideas men have about fatherhood! A man will make a woman the mother of his child whom he thinks too unclean to be his wife!"

"Yes, well, but if a woman ain't good, she had ought to take care not to have no children."

"Then bad men ought never to be fathers—and the race would stop!"

"That wouldn't do—to have the race stop. We are got to have people; and plenty of 'em. I've been a capitalist just long enough to have discovered that where there ain't no crowded population (more workers than there's work fur, you understand) that's where there can't be no great fortunes built up. No, you got to keep up the population, Miss Susan. That's why we are got sich severe laws agin birth control and agin vice districts and agin anything else that tends to keep marriage from bein' a *necessity*. You're got to make it a necessity if you're goin' to keep the race a-goin' and capital safe!"

"Do you mean to tell me that what we innocently take for laws to protect morality are just meant to protect and promote industrial exploitation?" asked Susan, incredulously.

"That's about it. Only I didn't put it so scientific. I ain't got your learnin', but I got my *facts* all right! We ain't got no moral laws fur no other purpose; fur every man knows in his heart that nature's instincts is too strong fur him; he can't no more go agin 'em than he can stop Niagary!—than a chicken can stop moultin'; or the grass not grow in the spring! Nature's *nature*—and that's all there is to it!"

"Then society is built on a lie, is it? Respectability is a sham and men and women are all hypocrites?"

"Och, well, I wouldn't go so fur as to say that. I myself try to be as honest as I otherwise can be. I——"

"Oh—*hush!*" exclaimed Susan, her revitalized nerves rasped beyond endurance.

"*You ain't no hypocrite, anyhow!*" grinned Joe. "*You ain't no flatterer, anyhow!*"

It was the next afternoon, near the hour for closing school, when Susan suddenly felt that she could not, that day—*simply could not*—endure Joe Houghton's society on her walk to the station. She must manage somehow to elude him. So she surreptitiously turned her clock forward five minutes and dismissed her school in advance of the hour, before Joe would even have started from his cottage for the school-house. He would probably think, when he found an empty school, that his own watch had played him a trick. His amazing confidence, in spite of her constant rebuffs, in his ability to win her over ultimately, would prevent him from suspecting her of going to such lengths to escape him.

However, she did not really care whether he saw through her ruse. She only knew that to-day she could not and would not endure walking with him.

But when in taking the long and indirect route to the station across the field behind the school-house and then through a beautiful stretch of woodland, she suddenly saw, strolling slowly toward her in the woodsy path, Sidney Houghton, looking gloriously strong and handsome and prosperous, dressed in riding togs and carrying a riding crop, she wildly regretted, for an instant, that she was not on the high-road with Joe.

There was no way of escape without plainly running away. This, she quickly decided, she would not do.

In the first instant of their encounter she saw that he did not recognize her—she was so greatly altered; with all his old elaborate courtesy he stepped from the narrow path to allow the young lady to pass, removing his hat, not just tipping it, bowing from the waist, not merely nodding—and the next instant, as recognition flashed into his eyes, she knew for a certainty from his consternation that he had never learned *who* was the teacher of the little school across the road from his home.

“Why! You are—Susanna!” he gasped, almost staggering forward in the path, and blocking her way. Every drop of colour left his face and lips as he stood staring at her.

She saw that he, too, was greatly changed; he looked much more than a year older; his face was lined and worried, and his mouth drooped and sagged.

Susan who, for weeks, had been nervously dreading an encounter like this, found herself, now, to her own surprise, perfectly quiet and cool.

“Are you—did you—come out here to White Oak to see me?” faltered Sidney.

“I teach the district school of White Oak Station.”

“The White Oak Station school! You are teaching that school right across the road from White Oak Farm!”

“I have been teaching there for five months.”

Susan’s silky, soft voice, that had never failed to charm this man, fell familiarly upon his soul, grown weary of the rasping fretfulness of a pampered, dissatisfied wife.

“But it’s impossible! You can’t teach there! You must see that you can’t! It’s——”

He stopped short, gazing at her with a look of fright that seemed to her rather inexplicable.

“You shall not interfere with my keeping my

school! I am practically the only support of my family."

"But—but it's impossible—you——" He faltered.

"Why should it be?"

He gulped and did not answer.

"You won't interfere?"

"I would not willingly hurt you more than I've already done, but——"

"I shall depend on your not interfering. Will you please let me pass?"

"Susanna! I behaved like a dog to you!"

"Don't insult a dog. You behaved like yourself. You were quite true to yourself. I was not. I was false to myself. I degraded myself. You didn't," she concluded, starting to pass on.

He put out his hand to check her, but at the fire that flashed from her eyes at the approach of his touch he shrank back; not, however, making way for her to go.

"You have grown so beautiful!" he stammered.

"I expected to see you a wreck! Your terrible illness—your suffering! Your father told me how——"

"My father told you! My father would not speak to you!"

The colour flooded Sidney's face and his eyes fell.

"What do you mean?" Susan breathlessly asked.

"When did my father ever tell you of my illness?"

"Just before we—I—went abroad—I inquired—and I was told how desperately ill you were and not expected to pull through. I thought you *had* died!—until two months ago when I returned to America and learned you were alive!"

"Who told you I was alive?"

"You—I—made inquiries—I learned it——"

She saw he was not being candid with her. The truth was not in him.

"Susanna! You are not the only one that has

suffered! Bad as you think me, I was not a hardened criminal, and when I thought I had killed you——”

“I am sure it must have been a great relief to you. It’s rather awkward having me alive, isn’t it?—and living right in your neighbourhood! I suppose Mrs. Houghton thinks I’m comfortably and safely dead, doesn’t she?”

He nodded dumbly.

“It will probably be something of a shock to her to find out her mistake!”

“She won’t know you if she sees you—you are so changed! You are wonderful! You never were so lovely as this!—but Susanna! For God’s sake, don’t reveal yourself to my wife!”

“I am your wife!”

He stared at her without answering.

“You convinced me so well, you remember, that a few ceremonial words could add nothing to the holy sacrament of our true marriage! Let me tell you something! If our child had lived, I would have pursued you to the ends of the world to make you right the wrong you would have done to her!”

“*Her!*” he exclaimed, involuntarily—then drew back, white and trembling. “Was it a girl?” he feebly asked.

“I think so.”

“You—you don’t know?”

“I’m not sure. None of them seemed sure!”

“Susanna! You poor, poor girl! How I wish I could right the wrong I’ve done to *you!*”

Her bosom rose and fell in a long, deep breath. “You never can,” she said, hopelessly, a far-away light in the tragic depths of her eyes. “I have borne you a dead child!—and had to thank heaven that it was dead!”

Sidney leaned limply against a tree by the path.

His eyes shifted from her face; he could not look at her. A silence fell between them, in which the woodland sounds of birds and rustling tree-tops seemed shrilly loud and clamorous.

After a moment Susan spoke, in the quiet, almost lifeless tone that had become habitual with her.

"What I cannot forgive is that I had to *want* my baby to be dead! Do you remember a play of Euripides—*Medea*—that you and I once read together? Medea said she would rather stand in battle three times with shield and sword than bear one child! And she tells Jason, who has forsaken her, 'I could forgive a childless man. But I have borne you children.' I knew that Greek civilization was a thing of wonder, but I didn't suppose it was so sympathetic with women."

Sidney did not attempt to answer. Again she made a movement to pass him; and at this he looked up and once more blocked her way.

"Susanna! Believe me! I did love you! I have suffered for what I did to you! I do suffer!—for it was you only that I loved!"

"Ha!" came her little mocking laugh. "You loved me! Love! Don't desecrate the word, if it *has* any sacredness! Do men bruise and hurt and wound to death the souls of the women they love? You loved *me*! Oh! Let me pass, please."

He did not move.

"I repeat it—it was you only that I loved!"

She looked him over appraisingly.

"What I cannot understand," she said in a tone so genuinely puzzled that he could not doubt her sincerity, "is that I ever could have cared enough for so miserable a creature as you, Sidney, as to do what I did for you! I can find *no* excuse for myself! I knew I was dragging myself in the mire—I was being a

female, not a woman! It was so stupid of me not to have seen you for the poor, cheap thing you are, Sidney!"

"You need not try so hard to humiliate me—it's quite unnecessary!"

"And yet," she said, judicially, "after all, it was (for you) just a choice as to which of your two children you would make legitimate; and you naturally chose to marry the mother who could give you what you wanted more than you ever wanted anything else in this world—money and ease and luxury and social power."

He gazed at her in a sort of stupefaction. "My *two* children!" he repeated, vaguely. "What—what do you mean?"

"Your little son is as old as ours would be."

"How—how do you know?"

"You do well to keep him hidden—valuing respectability as you do."

"I—I don't know what you mean!"

"A gentleman does not marry his mistress," you remember you told me? Almost everything you ever said to me was a lie! It seems that sometimes a gentleman does marry his mistress when she has wealth and position; when he can do it without losing his respectability."

"You mean—you are insinuating a slander against my wife?" he exclaimed with an impetuous astonishment and indignation that made her, in her turn, marvel at him. Was he a consummate actor or an utter fool? So sensitive as this about his wife's "honour" when he had so pitilessly robbed her of hers (at least according to the world's standards; she knew, now, how artificial and chaotic those standards were). And a moment ago he had told her he had loved her!

"Are you saying to me," he asked, growing very

red as he drew himself up from the tree against which he had been leaning, "that I married my mistress?"

"You are very astute to catch my idea so quickly. And must I conclude, then, that you are not a 'gentleman'? Or that you lied when you said gentlemen didn't do such things? What do you mean, anyway, by a gentleman? I've often wondered!"

"Are you going to spread that idea of yours about this neighbourhood, Susanna?"

"My idea about your being a gentleman? Or my idea that you married your mistress?"

"Stop! I did not!"

"Your son is over a year old."

"You don't know what you are saying! You—you are talking wildly! You——"

But suddenly, before the cool, unwavering glance with which she met his futile indignation, it collapsed like a bubble and once more he limply leaned against the tree.

"You hold my fate in your hands, Susanna!" he said, heavily. "My wife thinks (as I did until I returned to America) that you died in child-bed. I have not told her you did not. If she knew you were alive—and living and working here at our very door!—she would think I had deceived her! She would be suspicious of our—that I still cared for you! She would be bitterly jealous! Our already strained domestic life would break!"

She took a step nearer to him. "Do you know what I would do if my child were living? I would force you to divorce your wife and marry me!"

Her words seemed to have the effect of startling and thrilling him. As he gazed at her—her soft bright eyes, her flushed cheeks, the short, tender curls about her fair neck, the swell and fall of her bosom, all the mighty lure of her lovely womanhood—a hungry look came into his eyes; a look so bitterly

familiar to her that she drew back with a sharp horror.

"Susanna!" he stretched a shaking hand toward her. "If our child——"

"Only for my child's sake, not for my own!" she cried, breathlessly. "Yes, I would force you to marry me—but I would never, never, never be yours!"

Sidney's shaking hand dropped to his side.

"And since," he spoke after a moment's pregnant silence between them, "your—our child—does not live—what shall you do?"

"Do you know me so little as to suppose it would gratify me to break up your marriage? You need have no anxiety about what I shall do. I am not enough interested in anything concerning you, Sidney, to disturb your peace and prosperity."

"But your mere presence in this neighbourhood! To be sure Laura would never recognize you; she doesn't even know your name; I would never tell her your name, Susanna—but she could so easily hear of your teaching that school——"

"You can't hope to keep it from her that I am living! Your mother will visit you and may any day see me——"

A look of pain crossed his face; and Susan knew, before he spoke, that he had lost his mother.

"She died of a stroke while I was abroad; brought on, I have always believed, by the strain and anxiety of my—my sudden marriage, of my——"

"I understand," said Susan as he floundered. "The strain of getting you married before I could force your hand——"

"Don't, don't! Please! Spare her, Susanna! I have suffered enough on her account!"

"So have I!"

"You are hard!"

"I try to be—or I could not live!"

"But you must see, Susanna, that it won't do for you to remain about here! You can easily get another school. I'll help you all I——"

"You shall have nothing to do with my life. And I have no concern with yours. I shall not give up my school."

"But I can't stand it! It will drive me crazy! Having you so near—the constant dread of exposure——"

"Exposure? But your wife knows all there is to be known except that I am still alive."

"You don't understand! There are complications in the situation that you don't understand! You *must* leave this neighbourhood, Susanna! I will give you——"

"You will never give me anything," she quietly interrupted. "Not even," she added with a dreary smile, "the furniture you robbed me of."

He turned red at this unexpected stab and before he could collect himself to reply, she had forced her way past him and was gone.

CHAPTER VI

THE TENTACLES CLOSE IN UPON SUSAN

JOE HOUGHTON'S absence from home to attend the Cashtown cattle sale gave Susan a blessed four days' respite from his persistent wooing.

She had declined his urgent invitation to accompany him to Cashtown.

"The ride over is awful nice. Plenty of scenery and all like that—you're so much fur scenery, I took notice a'ready. They ain't nothin' about *you* escapes me, you bet you!"

"*Isn't* there!" Susan returned with a gentle mockery quite lost upon Joe.

"You bet there ain't! You better come with. You'd see lots of people at the sale—if people *interests* you."

"But I wouldn't think of closing my school for an outing."

"Ain't I president of the school board? What I say goes."

"I wouldn't neglect my work no matter who said I might."

"Nor me, neither! *I* never let my work fur no pleasure-seekin'." Joe so approvingly agreed with her commendable declaration that she instantly felt like repudiating it. "And I'm wery glad," he added, "to find you so conscientious, too, like me. Fur if you're that pertikkler over your school work, you'll be the same at your housework, oncet we're married."

"Oh, is *that* why you are so pleased with me? I thought for a minute that you were public spirited and concerned for the education of White Oak Station."

"Och, no, me, I always think of myself before I think of the education of the rising generation," Joe frankly admitted. "I'd sooner have you along to Cashtown than to have White Oak Station good educated. But I ain't startin' in by encouragin' you to slight work. That *would* be a bad beginnin'!"

"A bad beginning of what?"

"Of our life together, Miss Susie."

"Dream on," said Susan, "if it amuses you."

He had pressed another invitation upon her which she had also declined.

"If you won't go *with*, then I wisht you'd stay at my house whiles I'm off, and see to it that that there mean-actin' housekeeper I got don't *let* Josie and go runnin'! I can tell her that you'll wisit her to keep her comp'ny."

"I can't stay away from home; father is not well," Susan had objected to this plan; for the tenant-farmer's cosy cottage at White Oak Farm where Joe now lived was only a few rods away from the mansion in which his brother resided.

"I thought mebby," said Joe, greatly disappointed at her refusal, "that if I could get you interested in Josie, you might want to get married to me just fur the sake of havin' sich a cute little cuss all ready made fur you!"

"I am interested in Josie, but, you see, I love all babies and I couldn't possibly marry all their fathers."

Ever since the day when, for an instant, Susan had held Sidney Houghton's baby boy in her arms, after picking him up from his overturned coach in front of her school-house, she had wondered at herself that with her feeling for Sidney so dead her heart could

yet yearn over his child as it had done then, and every time since then, that she had caught a glimpse of the appealing little fellow. Joe's boy, Josie, was a dear baby, too, but he did not attract her in the poignant, irresistible way that Georgie did.

"One would think I would shrink from the successful rival of *my* child," she marvelled.

"I promise you," she had answered Joe, "that I shall run into your cottage and see after Josie three times a day while you are away: before and after school and at the noon recess."

And with this Joe had had to be satisfied.

This afternoon, as she was about to leave her school-house for her final visit of the day to the baby of the cottage, she was detained a moment by the irate mother of one of her pupils, who had tramped a half mile from her home to complain to "Teacher" that her boy's "dinner kittle" had been tampered with.

"I fixed him sich a nice kittle; and he saved back a piece of snitz pie to eat on the way home; but till he come to look fur that there snitz pie after school, here he seen it was swiped! Yes, it's some swiper in this here school of yourn, Teacher!"

Susan promised Mrs. Kuntz that she would hound down the criminal. Mr. Kuntz was a school director, so it behooved the teacher to placate Mrs. Kuntz. Susan was, by this time, very familiar with the ways of school directors. To be sure, any teacher of White Oak Station whom Joe Houghton favoured did not need to concern herself much about the rest of the school board, for Joe held a mortgage against the land of more than half of them. The wives of the directors were sometimes inclined to give themselves airs with the teacher who held her "job" by the votes of their husbands. But it was of course so widely known that Susan Schrekengust was a prime favour-

ite with the wealthy widower that she enjoyed an unusual immunity from "airs". However, she was only too well aware that just so soon as Joe realized, finally and irrevocably, that she would not marry him, his spite would wreak itself upon her, not only by seizing their home from her parents, but by taking her school away from her. Her heart stood still with dread sometimes when it was borne in upon her how completely he held her and hers in his power.

As soon as Mrs. Kuntz had left her Susan came out from her school-house, locked the door, and went across the road for her visit to the baby, Josie. Mrs. Kuntz, who saw where she went, reported to her son that evening at supper that Joe Houghton was "not doin' all the courtin'."

"Teacher's helpin' along a little herself. Joe he wasn't there to fetch her to-day, like you say he *is* every day, so she went after *him*! Yes, you bet you she's doin' her part, too, in the courtin'!"

It was after Susan's visit to Joe's cottage, when she was walking through Sidney's private grounds to the highroad (her only way out), that suddenly, at a bend in the path, she saw approaching her, a few yards distant, Mrs. Sidney Houghton, strolling leisurely in the May afternoon sunshine, followed by two big dogs that jumped about her playfully, to whose demonstrations she responded affectionately.

She was a slim, graceful woman, very tastefully dressed. An apparently unconscious haughtiness was manifest in the poise of her small head and in the way she carried herself.

As she came nearer, Susan saw that the radiant bloom of the young girl whom, a year ago, she had seen for a few tragic moments in Sidney Houghton's rooms was gone, and that a blighted, almost soured, aspect had taken its place.

The thought flashed upon Susan, "In her place,

even if I were disappointed in Sidney, I couldn't look like that if I had that baby boy!"

And then, at that moment, Susan saw the baby boy escape from his nurse on the lawn and come toddling toward his mother and her dogs; a child supposed to be only seven or eight months old walking alone!

But his mother pushed him away and kept the dog at her side. The child, to balance himself when pushed, caught at his mother's skirt, a spotless, creamy broadcloth, with his grimy little hands.

"Clara!" Mrs. Houghton called sharply to the nurse, "come take him away! See what he's done!" displaying the soiled spots on the skirt she had jerked from his clutch. "Why don't you keep him cleaner? He's always so disgustingly dirty! Take him away from me!"

Clara snatched the child from her and shook him, but her roughness met with no reproof from the baby's mother.

As he was borne away sobbing Mrs. Houghton unconcernedly continued her stroll, her dogs leaping about her as she stretched toward them caressingly her gleamingly white hands.

Susan felt a suffocating indignation at this spectacle, at the same time that she was desolated with the deepest sadness by it.

"Such a dear little boy! How can she? How can she?" she asked herself with a heavy heart.

It was not until she and Mrs. Houghton drew near to each other in the path that it occurred to her to wonder whether Sidney Houghton's wife would recognize her. But they had seen each other for such a brief moment that day over a year ago; and Susan was sure she never would have known this woman to be the Laura Beresford of that terrible day if she had met her anywhere but here.

When in a moment Mrs. Houghton suddenly saw her, there was, in the surprised inquiry of her glance, an absolute absence of any recognition. As the lady and her two dogs quite filled the path Susan was unable to get by at once, and the two women stopped, for an instant, face to face.

Susan reflected with some complacency how little she looked like a country school teacher. Mrs. Houghton probably mistook her for a visitor. This supposition was confirmed by Mrs. Houghton's hesitatingly offering her hand.

"You wished to see me?" she asked.

"No," answered Susan, "I have just come from an errand at the tenant-farmer's cottage."

Mrs. Houghton, without a comment, stepped back upon the lawn to allow the intruder to pass.

Susan thought, as she continued on her way, how incongruous it did seem for that high-bred, distinguished looking woman to be the sister-in-law of a man like Joe Houghton.

"She would not even ask to her table that man who thinks himself quite worthy to marry me!" thought Susan, a vague wonder in her heart at life's incongruities.

She found herself actually feeling, however, that if Joe's baby were as appealing to her as Georgie was, she could almost be persuaded, as Joe had suggested she might be, to marry him for the delight of having such a child to cherish!

"And Georgie's own mother doesn't realize her blessed privilege! Prefers those dogs!"

She had several times caught glimpses of Sidney playing with his little son about the grounds of White Oak Farm and there could not be a moment's doubt of *his* devotion and tenderness to his child.

Upon her arrival at home, this afternoon, she saw, as she stopped at the gate, her father standing beside

the road which ran back of the house past his truck garden, talking to a man in a big touring car.

Susan instantly recognized that car; it was the most luxurious she had ever seen; it belonged to Sidney Houghton. She could not be mistaken, surely. Her heart began to beat thickly. Could it be Sidney Houghton who was talking to her father? What could they possibly have to say to each other?

It flashed upon her that perhaps Sidney had learned through Joe of her father's dire financial straits and was trying to take advantage of their predicament by offering a bribe to her father if he would move away from this vicinity where *her* presence so threatened the Houghtons' domestic security.

But why did her father, with his deep and bitter hatred of this man who had injured his daughter, consent to parley with him, to exchange a single word with him?

"I'll find out who is in that car!" she quickly decided.

Dropping the gate latch, she started on a run toward the truck garden.

But when at the sound of her steps her father looked around and saw her hurrying through the orchard toward the road, he abruptly concluded his interview with his visitor, the car almost instantly moved on, and Mr. Schrekengust, walking as rapidly as his feebleness allowed, went back across the road to his garden.

Susan hesitated to follow him. Her heart ached, these days, for her old father, so broken because of her who had been the pet of his life. If he was trying to avoid her she would not torment him.

She turned away and with slow, thoughtful step, went back to the house.

In the past year she had grown accustomed to the

sudden silences that would often fall upon her family at her approach. Just now, as she unexpectedly entered by the kitchen instead of by the front of the house, she surprised an earnest conversation between her sisters over their preparations for supper.

"A child brought up so, what will it anyhow *give* out of this child?" Lizzie was exclaiming, emotionally.

"Yes, anyhow!" Addie sadly responded.

"It wonders me if Susie——" began Lizzie, but she stopped short as, turning from the stove, she saw her young sister standing near the kitchen door.

"Och, Susie!" she gasped. "What fur do you come in so quiet, a body never hears you?"

"Why should it frighten you?" asked Susan, sinking wearily into a chair by the table on which Addie was spreading the cloth for supper.

"It didn't just to say frighten me—but it drewed my breath short! You most always come by the front door in!"

"What child do you mean, Lizzie?"

Lizzie stooped, before replying, to pick up from the floor the fork she had just noisily dropped.

"I was talkin' about Joe Houghton's baby you tol' us about a'ready, that's left to the hired housekeeper all the time; and how she *lets* it so much and goes off."

"But some mothers are even worse," said Susan, pensively. "Some mothers care more for their pet dogs than for their own children!"

"Och!" cried Lizzie, "does it give such mothers as that in the world, Susie?"

"Who was that talking to Father just now out by the truck garden?" asked Susan.

"Was he talkin' to someone? Och, just look," Lizzie changed the subject, as she suddenly turned to the window, "how these here wines is owerhingin' the windah yet! I got to make my wines down off

of this here windah, or it'll give dark in the kitchen; ain't?"

"Never mind your vines, Lizzie, *please!* Whose big car was that out by the truck garden a few minutes ago?"

"I didn't take notice to a car out," returned Lizzie, keeping her face turned away to the window. "Was it a car out?"

Susan could almost have been moved to smile at this futile duplicity; for in the quiet monotony of the village life a touring car stopping at any home in Reifsville was an event only rivalled in interest and importance by a death, a marriage, or a crime.

Susan turned to Addie. "Will *you* tell me, Addie, please—what was Father talking about to—to Sidney Houghton?"

The name came with difficulty from her lips in the presence of her chaste sisters.

"It wasn't him!" cried Lizzie almost hysterically. "As if Pop or any of us *would* speak to him! How you talk, Susie! Say, Addie," she cried, pointing to the waffle iron on the stove, with obvious intent to divert the subject, "will you look how our neighbour sent back our waffle iron busted yet! Ain't she the dopplig* housekeeper, anyhow! This is the last time I'm ever a-goin' to borrow away *anything!*"

"You ought not to have secrets from me, Lizzie, about—about Sidney Houghton," persisted Susan.

"Och, Susie, us we ain't got no secrets from you! I got awful nice creamed chicken fur your supper. That chicken we had Sundays was so big. It wonders me such a young chicken could be so big; ain't?"

"It's the *kind* of it," explained Addie. "Them Wyandottes gives awful big chickens at a wery young age."

*Awkward.

Susan, with a long, tired breath, gathered up her school books, left the kitchen and went upstairs to her own bedroom.

Later, when in answer to a summons to supper, she went down again, she noticed, as the family gathered about the table, that her father was very white.

Should she annoy him, she asked herself, with the question which tormented her? Evidently the family was concealing something from her; and it would go so hard with her father to have to lie to her; he had no sophistry to justify any deviation from the straight and simple tenets of his creed.

But while she hesitated he spoke; and the wholly unwonted irritability in his usually bland voice struck a chill to her heart.

"Warmed-over chicken again!" he said, fretfully, as he pushed away the platter his wife offered him. "I have sick of that there chicken you've been offerin' me ever since last Sabbath a'ready! I work hard and I need fresh meat *sometimes*!—and not sloppy hash *all* the time!"

"But us we can't afford to buy fresh meat, Pop," said Lizzie, looking distressed. "We are got to use the pork and chickens we are got a'ready."

The old man's tense mood seemed suddenly to collapse. "Och, I know, I know," he admitted, dully. "To be sure, I know we can't buy fresh meat."

"It does seem," said Susan, "as if the people who do the hard work ought to have the fresh, nourishing meat. But it is the 'idle rich,' the women who contribute nothing to the common good, but only prey upon society—some of them not even taking care of their own children—it is they who have the best food; while the labourer, who *needs* strong nourishment, has the poorest and the least! Things are very badly regulated!"

"Och, yes," agreed Mr. Schrekengust, pessimistically; "and as fur our government, it's spoiled through!"

"The worst thing that can happen to any one, it seems to me," said Susan, "is to inherit a fortune; not to have to work for what you have."

"Yes, well, but me, I'd like it awful well if some-one would inherit a fortune to *me*," said Lizzie, "so's I could live without workin'."

"So would I!" Susan ignominiously agreed with her.

"Them thoughts is of the Enemy," her father admonished them. "Remember you got to give an account to Gawd for your words as well as fur your deeds."

"It seems to me," said Susan, recklessly, "that He'll have to give an account to *us*, for all the bitter suffering and wrong in this world! *We* didn't create it! If we are evil then the source from which we exist must be evil! Oh, I think He owes a very large accounting to us poor human wretches!"

"Tut, tut, Susie!" cried her father, shocked. "Somepin'll happen to you if you talk so wicked!"

"It often wonders me," sighed Mrs. Schrekengust, "what Gawd must think of us mortals the way we live so carnal and disobey to Him so!"

"What must we think of *Him* for putting us into a world like this, of turmoil and hate and injustice and suffering!" Susan persisted. "It's up to Him, not us, to *make good*!"

Her father, instead of admonishing her again, looked at her strangely. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "Here's us that has worked hard all our lives, all of us, and always—or nearly always," he added, with conscientious accuracy, "tried to do right; and now in our old age, me and Mother has got to get out of our home here where we lived all our married lives

together. I got to tell yous all," he stated, slowly, his voice heavy with sadness, despair in his eyes, "that we got to make up our minds to move away from Reifsville right aways!"

Susan realized from the startled looks of her sisters and her mother that she was perhaps the least astonished of them all at this announcement. They had, indeed, faced the possibility of having to leave their home, but they had never dreamed of leaving the village itself, where Mr. and Mrs. Schrekengust had lived all their lives; nor had they expected to be obliged to leave their house immediately.

"I got a offer of a good little place," continued Mr. Schrekengust, "forty mile from here——"

"Och, Gott!" cried his wife. "Forty mile yet! Who ever heard the likes, Pop! I couldn't home myself that fur off!"

"Since we are got to leave this here house anyhow, Mom, we might as well go fur off as near by. It's a awful good offer. I got—a nice truck farm on wery easy terms."

"Who makes you this offer, Father?" asked Susan in a low voice, her tone very gentle.

"A business man I done a favour fur oncet. He wants this here land here, preferable to the place he offers me over in Fokendauqua. He'll gimme that there place over there, with two horses and two cows throwed in; and in exchange, he'll take over our place here *with the mortgage on it*. We'd be free of debt and I'd anyhow let a home over your heads when I am gone."

"And who is this man?" persisted Susan in an ominously quiet tone, "that makes you this very extraordinary offer?"

"It's neither here nor there who he is," replied her father, querulously. "It's too good a offer fur us to throw down. Us we'll be out on the road soon, with-

out no home at all, if we don't look out! I *got* to take this here offer!"

"No, you don't, Father!"

"Yes, I do, Susie! I tell you I got to."

"But if you move to Fokendauqua, I could not live at home—for I don't want to give up my school; I had a hard enough time to get it. And I might not be able to get a school near Fokendauqua."

"I won't leave you stay on here if we go!" cried her father so fiercely that she winced as at a deformity, so unlike him it was to speak ungently. "And you ain't to keep on teachin' that there school, *whether* or no! Right acrost the road from that there dirty rascal's place!—where any day you can run acrost him! You'll go with us *along* when we move away!"

"If you are moving just to get me away from that school, then I will give up the school, Father, and try to get my old position here in Reifsville, so that you need not leave here. You and Mother are rooted here and *couldn't* live anywhere else!"

"You needn't try to get back your old school here, fur even over here, you're too near to that there scoundrel! We want to get as fur away from him as we otherwise *can* get!"

"But it is he that is making you this offer, Father!" cried Susan, utterly bewildered.

"No, it ain't! What fur do you say it's him? It ain't him!"

"I saw his automobile in the road by the truck garden when I came from school."

"It wasn't hisn."

"Whose was it?"

"A stranger astin' the road to White Oak Station."

"Father," said Susan, ignoring this obvious evasion, "*why* do you have any dealings with Sidney Houghton? Don't you know that we would all

rather be homeless on the highroad than accept a favour from him? *Why* are you letting him bribe you to give up——”

She stopped short. Her father's head had suddenly sunk upon his breast; and now his hands slipped from the table and hung limply at his side; the blood which had rushed to his forehead was slowly receding, leaving the hue of death upon his old worn face.

The stricken old man who had dreaded the ordeal of leaving his home and going into strange surroundings had suddenly, without a moment's warning, taken his departure alone to that far country to which none might go with him, of those who loved him.

CHAPTER VII

JULY, AUGUST, AND SEPTEMBER

IN AFTER years Susan was often obliged to bring before her memory very vividly the conditions which could have been overwhelming enough to have driven her into marrying Joe Houghton; for there were times when nothing seemed to explain or justify it.

There had been the mortgage held by Joe, covering the full value of her widowed mother's house and land; his Shylock determination to have his price, which was her hand in marriage; his ruthlessness in having her voted out of her school at the end of May, in order to force her to yield to him; her mother's speechless grief at the bare thought of leaving the home which held all her memories of her dead mate; her sisters' unfitness for earning their own living in any other way than in domestic service on a farm. Whichever way she had turned, there had seemed to be no escape for her. Every possible avenue had seemed closed, with whips and scorpions beating her back. It was not for herself that she had succumbed to the pressure of gaunt Want. She could always, somehow, somewhere, have earned a living for herself, and had she been unable to do so, far easier would it have been to starve and die than to marry a man she despised. But that comparatively simple solution of her difficulty had not been open to her. She must live and take care of her helpless mother and sisters, made helpless through her; for had it not

been for her, surely her father would still be with them, to support and comfort them. It had been she who had brought shame and grief and want upon them. She, then, must stand by them and see them through. Would the great sacrifice she was making act as an antidote in her soul to the degradation of such a marriage?

Well, even if she herself must "sink i' the scale," she could not see her mother die before her eyes in pining for her home; her sisters, who had lived and worked for her all her life, forced to the humiliation and slavish labour of domestic service on a farm. She had always believed that circumstances could not crush the valiant soul; that one could rise above and master them if one would. But the conditions which at that time had closed in upon her had seemed to force her to the bitter choice between saving herself and sacrificing her mother and sisters.

She had known from the first that she would not sacrifice them. Her decision had been delayed only by her desperate efforts to save herself as well.

It had been while she was thus battling for her own soul's salvation that Sidney Houghton, never dreaming of his brother's very commercial courtship of the school teacher of White Oak Station, had approached Mrs. Schrekengust with a renewal of the offer he had made to her husband: if she and her three daughters would move to the comfortable little home which he would give them over in Fokendauqua, forty miles distant, he would take upon himself all their debts here in Reifsville and see to it that they should never come to want.

To Susan, the amazing spectacle of her mother's heart-broken submission to this proposition, in the face of her hitherto deep and wordless grief at the mere mention of leaving her home in Reifsville, had had in it something mysteriously sinister. Why had

her father denied to her that it was Sidney Houghton who had made this offer to him? He had died with a lie on his lips!—he who had all his life been so painfully truthful. Not for gain, not for any material thing, would he have told a lie. What had been back of his apostasy? What was back of her mother's acquiescence to a thing which was tantamount to signing her own death warrant?

An idea had dawned upon Susan which she had instantly rejected as being altogether incredible. Even Sidney Houghton, weak and false as she knew him to be, would scarcely be capable of the perfidy of threatening her mother (whose holiest religion, like that of all women of her class, was Respectability) with the exposure of the secret shame of her daughter—victimized by himself!—unless Mrs. Schrekengust would at once move away with her family from the precarious vicinity of his home.

And yet, impossible as such baseness seemed, even for Sidney Houghton, what lesser necessity than the maintaining of their ghastly secret could so have coerced her mother?

A hot fury of rebellion had risen in Susan's heart against the humiliation of being thus driven away for the sake of Sidney's security and peace of mind. If nothing were now left but to choose between marrying Joe or having her mother suffer and surely die from being beholden to Sidney Houghton for a home and a livelihood in a distant town, could she hesitate? She had the human weakness to feel that there would be actually a drop of bitter consolation for her in thus defying her betrayer and going boldly to live in the very shadow of his home; to be hourly in his sight; to pass daily to and fro before the very eyes of his wife!

Her decision had been swiftly made.

On the day when Sidney had called by appointment

to give over to her mother the deed to the Fokendauqua house and lot and receive in exchange the mortgaged Reifsville property, he had been met with the announcement that Mrs. Schrekengust could not now fulfil her part of the bargain to which she had previously agreed, inasmuch as her daughter, Susan, could not, under the present circumstances, be enticed away to Fokendauqua—seeing she no longer made her home with her mother—having married Joseph Houghton that very morning, July 28th, and gone to live at the tenant-farmer's cottage at White Oak Farm; and that therefore there was now no reason why they should leave Reifsville; for Joseph Houghton had that morning, before the marriage ceremony, given them a clear deed to their house and land.

How Sidney had received this astounding information Susan could only guess from the incoherent account of it she had received later from her mother and sisters.

"Och, Susie, he took it hard!"

"He turned awful white and there for a while he couldn't har'ly speak!"

"I believe, Susie, he likes you *yet*!"

"He ast me," said Mrs. Schrekengust, "what fur did I leave you marry a fellah like Joe that ain't worthy to tie your shoes yet! And I answered him, 'Yes, what fur did I ever leave you, Sidney Houghton, keep comp'ny with her!—you that wasn't fit neither to *lick* her shoes yet!' He turned whiter'n ever when I sayed that. But he ast us what we thought could have *made* you marry Joe, seein' as it wasn't in nature for a girl like you to love sich a fellah. And I sayed that now you had to be glad fur *any* decent husband; and that if Joe knowed all, he wouldn't think you was good enough fur *him*."

"But Sidney he wouldn't have it no other way,"

put in Lizzie, "than that you'd throwed yourself away."

"But I tol' him," added Mrs. Schrekengust, "you had a'ready throwed yourself away as fur as you could on *him*."

"Yes, Mom she come back at him fierce!" said Lizzie.

"And he took it that meek and calm, Susie, that it wondered me!" put in Addie.

Susan had no conscientious qualms in marrying Joe without "confessing her past," inasmuch as she asked no questions as to his past.

"He, too, was married before," she reasoned; for she persisted in believing that before high heaven, or "whatever gods there be," she had been Sidney Houghton's wife.

She felt sure that if Joe had been a man whom she could have found it possible to love, she would have felt impelled to tell him of her unmarried motherhood. But he had bought her for a price, as shamelessly as he would have bought a cow or a horse! Therefore, her past, like his, was her own.

In the early months of her married life, she was, however, never without a guilty sense of wronging her husband in her heart by her secret loathing of him; and she tried conscientiously to atone by scrupulously performing what seemed to her her wifely obligations; and by the devoted care she gave to his child; submitting to many things which otherwise she would not have borne—his little contemptible, maddening meannesses about expenditures, his refusal to hire any housework, his exactions of services from her such as he would not have dared to ask of any hired servant or housekeeper.

When it was too late—when both his exactions and her submission had become a habit with them not easy to break—she realized that she had begun all wrong.

"For if from the first I had taken a stand against such a régime, I could have carried the day!"

"By the time you learn, through bitter mistakes, how to live," she often reflected in after years, "your knowledge is of no use to you except to make you wild with regret!"

She had made Joe promise (and she could absolutely depend on his word) that he would never reveal to Josie in the years to come that she was not his own mother.

"I'll get that out of it, anyway—a son's love for his mother," she had told herself.

For Susan had learned from her doctor, over a year ago, that she could never bear another child. Had she not known this, no other considerations would have been strong enough to have forced her to marry Joe. An instinctive conviction that it would be a crime to let a child be born of a loveless marriage would have held her back. Susan's intuitive ethics, it will be observed, were not those commonly held by respectable people.

The "bitter consolation" she had anticipated in defying Sidney Houghton's efforts to get her away from the neighbourhood of his home, and coming to live at his very door, was postponed by his departure from home immediately after her marriage. He left, with his wife, child, and nurse, for a month at Newport.

"I see through that move!" Joe declared to Susan one day over their mid-day dinner in the cottage kitchen, Josie in a high chair at Susan's side. "They're too stuck-up, him and her, to take notice to *my* wife! So, to save their faces, they go off! Sich extravagance! Payin' *hotel* board when they're got a big, cool place like theirs to stay at!"

"Your sister-in-law seems to care so little for her baby, I'm surprised she takes him with her when she

goes away. He would be quite as well off here alone with his nurse as he is with her."

"Right you are! *She* don't give him no attention; nothin' like what you give to Josie, and him your step-child yet."

"We're to forget that he is not my own child," Susan reminded him.

"But Sid *he's* anyhow crazy about his kid," continued Joe. "He would not let him here alone with that dopplig nurse girl! You see, Susan, Sid ain't takin' no chances on that there baby dyin' and my Josie inheritin' White Oak Farm!"

Susan recognized it as very characteristic of Sidney to have run away for a month from a situation which he must ultimately face.

From New York came a gorgeous wedding present from Sidney and his wife; a most unsuitable gift for a tenant-farmer's menage: a huge satin-lined case filled with every possible form of table silver—knives, forks, teaspoons, tablespoons, dessert spoons, bouillon spoons, orange spoons, after-dinner coffee spoons, oyster forks, fruit knives, bread-and-butter knives.

Joe gloated over the moneyed value of it, even while denouncing his brother's reckless and senseless extravagance.

"Put it good away; it would get stole if it was knew we had such grand stuff around. You see, Susan, you never was used to such things and don't know their walue; but I *was*, when I was a kid livin' at home, before my father died."

Susan did not think it worth while to tell him how "used to such things" she had become during her years at school, through the friendships she had made with girls from homes so unlike her own as to have seemed to her a wonderland of luxury and ease and refinement.

But she was glad that Joe would not expect her to

use this silver. It was promptly locked away in the attic.

From the moment that Susan had made up her mind to marry Joe her heart had desperately fixed itself upon the one compensation, besides her family's safety, which she might hope to find in her situation—the care and love of the baby. But since affection is not a thing to be commanded at will, perhaps the very intensity of her determination to lay hold, here, upon comfort and even blessedness, defeated her desire. Josie, although healthy, pretty, of average intelligence, and at times both cunning and interesting, proved to be peevish, exacting, and selfish to a degree that seemed to Susan quite hopeless. She could not, no matter how hard she tried, warm up to him. She was sure that if he had responded in the least to her overtures he would have won her immediately and completely, no matter what his trying faults of disposition. But nothing she could do seemed to awaken in the child any affection for her. She would have concluded that he had no heart, but for the fact that he was so extremely attached to his father.

Joe, who was morbidly jealous of Josie's affection, instead of being troubled by his persistence in repelling his step-mother's advances, seemed to gloat over it. While he would have resented her least neglect of the boy, he seemed to begrudge her the natural reward of her faithful care.

"Come here to your pop, Josie—see what I got fur you!" he would entice the child away from her the moment his jealous watchfulness detected in Josie any sign of fondness for her.

Josie very quickly learned to associate a rough repulsion of his "mother" with the reward of a lozenge or a ride "upsy-daisy" on his father's foot.

Susan foresaw that when it came to questions of

discipline Joe would always side with the child against her. She feared that it would require more patience and diplomacy than she could ever hope to command to deal with the problem.

Joe's jealousy was not confined to his child. It early became manifest that he would brook no rival in Susan's regard; such, for instance, as her love of books, the one love left to her out of the wreck of her life. He wished and expected her to be interested in nothing else in the world but his comfort and welfare and that of his boy. She soon found herself instinctively putting her reading out of sight at his approach and busying herself with house- or needle-work, in order to spare herself the morose, sullen silence, lasting sometimes a whole day, with which he would signify his displeasure when he found her reading; or his tirades against the *sort* of books she "wasted her time on." All novels were lumped together as abominations. Poetry was "for Sunday afternoons if you got to read it, but certainly not for busy week-days." Science baffled him. He once found her reading (or trying to read) Darwin's "Origin of Species," and when he had demanded to be told what it was about and had heard her reply, he waxed truly indignant. "The stuff yous simple females'll swallow yet!"

She tried to tell him that the evolution of man from a lower species was no longer an hypothesis, but an historical fact, and she read him some of the evidences of that fact.

But he wasn't impressed. "I can't pitcher it to myself. Can you pitcher it to yourself, a man's ever havin' been in such a form? It's a lie! Don't fill your head with such foolishness!"

"But it is the truth."

"No," he firmly denied it, "I can't pitcher to myself a man's ever having no other form. Why, no

person in White Oak Station believes such a thing as that there!"

"Must I believe nothing except what the people of White Oak Station believe?" smiled Susan.

"You're safer to."

"Why?"

"What's the use of thinkin' different from other folks?"

"What's the use of thinking just *like* other people?"

"Och, well," he gave it up, exhausted with such unwonted mental strenuousness, "have your own way. Think it, then—but *keep it to yourself*. I don't want folks 'round here sayin' I married a crazy woman!"

When just a month after Susan's marriage her mother died very suddenly at the end of August, from heart failure, Susan's wild rebellion against Fate, that she should have sacrificed herself so needlessly, turned itself speedily into a great indignation against herself; against that fatal weakness in her character which seemed always to inhibit her from wrestling with the knotty places in her life and conquering them.

"I've let myself be shoved about like a puppet!"

If one could only have the courage always to do what, in spite of threatened disaster, one saw was the only true thing to do—and then trust to Life to right it!

But of course only great souls were large enough and strong enough for such high heroism.

Joe was not unsympathetic for her grief for her mother. But he had a grotesque way of commingling his gentler feelings with his dominating sordidness.

"I guess, now, Susan, you'll be wantin' me to buy you one of these here stylish crape wails; ain't?—you bein' so much for dressin' stylish that way. But I took notice you didn't wear one of 'em fur your pop

when he died; I guess because you couldn't afford one; for I heard a'ready that they cost awful expensive—them crape wails. And I hold that since you didn't wear one fur your pop, it wouldn't look *according*, your wearing one fur your mom."

"Mennonites don't wear mourning."

"Yes, well, but you ain't no Mennonite."

"None of us will wear mourning," she reassured him.

His relief made him beam upon her benignly. "You show your good sense, Susan. Fur it would be a awful waste to *let* all them good clo'es you're got a'ready and go buy new black ones; ain't, it would?"

Susan vaguely wondered what it was going to be like when the clothes she now had were worn out and she was obliged to buy new ones. Her work as housekeeper and child's nurse was harder, more distasteful, and involved longer hours than had ever been the case with school teaching; yet she had nothing for it that she could call her own; nothing except what Joe saw fit to give her. Thus far he had never voluntarily offered her a dollar; and when she had one day asked him for money, he had inquired what she wanted it for. It had been for some household expenses, not for herself. He had given it to her grudgingly, mistrustfully, as though he suspected her of a design to defraud him.

Such was the chaos and horror of her soul in confronting, now, the needless sacrifice she had made in marrying Joe that the harrowing funeral orgie and all its gruesome accompaniments drove her almost into unrestrained hysteria. First, there was the elderly woman, unknown to the family with a passion for funerals, who had walked in from the country, five miles, "to view the remains of the deceased."

"I didn't know her in life, but I'd like to see her in death," she devoutly explained—which so moved the

hearts of Lizzie and Addie that they made her stay "for dinner."

Then the preacher's hypocritical tones and meaningless stock phrases which made Susan grind her teeth in impotent rebellion—"portals of memory," "life's peaceful waters," "God's smiles," "the Other Shore," the awful hymn droned out a line at a time alternately by the preacher and the people:

We'll miss you from our home, dear mother,
We'll miss you from your place;
A shadow over our lives is cast;
We'll miss the sunshine of your face.

Our hearts are bound with sorrow,
Yet the thought comes with each sigh,
She is safe with God's dear angels;
We shall meet her by and by.

And finally Lizzie's controversy with the undertaker over the palms which stood grouped at the head of the coffin and which the undertaker was going to load on his truck and take away with him.

"No, you don't!" Lizzie indignantly stopped him, right in the presence of their assembled kindred, friends, and neighbours, "you ain't to claim back *all* them palms! One third of them palms is *mine*—and them goes with Mom along!"

They had almost had a tug of war about it over the coffin.

Susan's struggles to keep herself in hand through the nightmare of it all ended in a nervous collapse which left her prostrated for weeks with a continuous, unconquerable pain in her head just at the base of her brain.

Joe's genuine alarm, his unexpected sympathy for her suffering, were a surprising revelation to her.

She had not thought him capable of real tenderness except for his boy. The extent of his feeling for her was indicated by his surprisingly suggesting one day, with evident intent to find something that would catch her interest, that perhaps she might like to learn to drive his roadster? She had several times requested to be allowed to do so and he had always refused.

"If you learn oncet you'll be wantin' to *go* all the time and you'd let your housework too much. Gasoline costs too expensive to be used unnecessary," he had said.

But now he told her that perhaps it would after all be an economical move and save a lot of his valuable time to let *her* make the occasional necessary trips to town.

He stipulated, however, that she must exercise self-restraint in the use of such a precious commodity as gasoline.

Susan's relation with Sidney, though it had not been sanctified by society or religion, had yet had in it such elements of beauty, joy, sacredness, that it had seemed at times to justify itself—as her entirely respectable marriage could not do, now that its motive, her mother's welfare, was removed. It was now that she felt herself to be "living in sin," as she had never felt while she loved; and when her mother's death removed the necessity of her immolation, she passionately longed to escape from her ignominy.

She even went to the length of suggesting to her sisters, some weeks after her mother's funeral, that if they had courage enough to give back to Joe their home in Reifsville, go with her to the city and open a boarding-house, she would leave her husband (whom she had married only to save her mother the grief of losing her home), and would help them to earn a comfortable living. Of course if they would not

consent to give back their property to Joe, she could not leave him; it would be going back on her bargain; it would be like stealing; but if they would consent——

But the consternation, even horror, of their faces at this, to them, disreputable proposition, told her, before they answered her, that she could never persuade them to such a step.

"Och, Susie, are you a *loose* woman that you talk so light about leaving your Mister! Who ever heard the likes!" exclaimed Lizzie.

The three sisters were sitting together on the front porch of the Reifsville cottage, Susan having driven over from White Oak in the roadster after the early farm supper, to put before them her plan.

"It's because I'm not a loose woman that I think I ought to leave Joe," she tried to explain. "I know how queer it sounds to you and Addie for me to say I think it's my living with him that's immoral—but that's what I think."

"But he's your *Mister*, Susie! How you talk, anyhow!"

"No, he is not my husband!" she suddenly cried out, passionately. "He's my keeper, my owner, and I'm his chattel! I can't stand it! I can't bear it!"

Her sisters stared in amazement upon her shrinking, shivering body, her trembling lips, her white face.

"Don't he use you nice, Susie?" asked Addie, anxiously.

"For Mother's sake I could have borne it, and if she had lived longer I might have gotten used to it. But now it seems so senseless to go on enduring such a life! I'm young—I'm not twenty-one yet. To think of living all the rest of my life with him! Oh, Lizzie, I can't! I just can't!"

"But what's the matter of him? He seems awful

nice and common toward what his stuck-up brother is!" argued Lizzie. "And he makes you a good purwider, don't he, Susie?"

"It's what he is, not what he does!" cried Susan, despairingly.

"You knowed what he was when you said Yes to him. And even fur Mom's sake you hadn't ought to have said Yes unlest you knowed you could stand him pretty good."

"I know that now. I know I made a terrible mistake. I was an idiot! There's no excuse for me! But before it's too late, Lizzie," Susan pleaded, "I want to mend my mistake!"

"It *is* too late," Lizzie pronounced. "Would it be treatin' Joe right and fair to up and leave him and disgrace him so before all the folks, when you ain't got no good reason except that he mebbby kreistles* you a little?"

Susan had not thought of that—of how unfair it would be to Joe.

"But he wouldn't deserve any sympathy," she argued, piteously, "for he backed me into a corner and forced me to marry him—on pain of our losing our home—when he knew I did not care for him and did not want to marry him."

"But you did marry him," said Addie, conclusively. "And what's done's done."

"Yes," corroborated Lizzie, "as it is, so it is, and that ends it."

"Why should it end it? It shan't end it!" cried Susan, fighting for her very soul. "You must help me to get out of it! You have helped me all my life—and I never needed your help more than I need it now!"

"We never helped you to go wrong, Susie—to disgrace and shame us!" Lizzie maintained. "And this

*Disgusts.

here thing you're astin us to do—to help you leave your Mister—just like a woman that's got loose morals that way—it wouldn't be right!”

“It seems to me you're got it good,” said Addie, “with that there pretty little boy and this here automobile car of Mister's and him so well-fixed and all, so's you ain't got to worry!”

“You offer me a stone for bread,” responded Susan, hopelessly, as she rose to leave them. “You would think it right for me to go away from him if he beat or starved me. You can't see that one's heart and mind and soul may be starved and torn every hour, every minute! You can't see!”

But even as she spoke, Susan realized, with a vague pain in her heart for her sisters, that perhaps the greater tragedy was theirs—in that they could not see.

CHAPTER VIII

AUTUMN

BY THE time Susan got back to White Oak Farm that September evening it was dark and late; and Joe, anxiously pacing the front porch of their picturesque cottage, greeted her crossly.

"Some married life!—me settin' here alone all evening and you off! Usin' up gasoline unnecessary! I just knowed it would go like this if I left you ~~run~~ my car! What did I tell you?" he said, accusingly.

Susan, offering no response, went into the house, leaving him to put the car into the garage.

A few minutes later, however, when he joined her in their room, he again took up his complaint.

"I might as well be single again if I got to set alone all evening! Where was you, anyhow?"

"Over to Reifsville to see Addie and Lizzie."

"Sixteen mile there and back! That used up anyhow near two gallon. And gasoline going up every day higher! What did you have to go over there fur?"

"They are lonesome—and so am I."

"Och, well," returned Joe, softened, "if you was feelin' a little lonesome, that way, after what's happened, then that's all right. But leave me tell you somepin, Susan," he said, seating himself in a rocking chair by the window and feasting his eyes on her young loveliness as she stood before the bureau with bare arms upraised to brush her short curly

hair. "Be *thankful* fur your grief fur your mother! Me, I never knowed my mother. Never knowed what it was to have no one care fur me in all my life—till I got Josie!"

"Didn't your wife care for you, Joe?" asked Susan, touched by the wistfulness in his voice.

"My wife? Well, it's you that can answer that—whether my wife cares for me."

"Your other wife then?"

"Och, she was so dumb and common, Susan; all she ast of me was that I make her a good purwider; and in turn she kep' my house nice and comfortable. That's all there was to it."

Susan did not ask him what he found more in her. At times she suspected him of something as near akin to a ~~romantic~~ passion for her as he was capable of feeling.

"Well, Susan, what do you think come in the evening mail whiles you was off?" he inquired as he rocked by the window.

"A letter from your brother?"

"Good guess! What do you think he wants me to do yet? *This* you won't guess so easy!"

"To leave here?"

"How did you know?" cried Joe in surprise.

"I've wondered and *wondered* why he has let you stay—you, his brother, working for him like a menial!"

"That's what *he* says in this here letter. He says it mortifies him and that it had ought to mortify me, too, if I had any pride. Huh!" grunted Joe.

"Why doesn't it?" asked Susan.

"I got my good reasons fur stayin' on here!" returned Joe, darkly, "and he darsen't chase me off, neither! He knows he darsen't! I'm a-goin' to write and tell him so! Look-a-here!" he added,

taking a newspaper from his pocket, rising and coming to her to point out a paragraph, "where it says how Sid and his wife is travellin' with that there lively set up there at Newport; folks that could buy him out a thousand times over and never feel it! *He* can't go their pace—the pace of the crowd he's tryin' to run with now. He ain't near rich enough! But Sid he always was awful ambitious that way, to git in with folks that had more'n what he had. And here's another piece in the paper," he went on, turning the sheet, "that says where he was bettin' wery high on some races and how he lost *thirty thousand dollars* yet! Thirty thousand, mind you! *Lost* it! Gosh, ain't Sid a fool! You just watch out and see how soon he'll git to the end of his tether now he's got money to spend!"

Susan plainly perceived that Joe entertained the happiest anticipations of his brother's speedy ruin.

"So you see," said Joe, "now that he's blowed in thirty thousand dollars and more, he wants to come home and stay safe back here fur a while on the farm; and so he wants me and you to get out before he comes."

"Does he say that?"

"As much as."

"Then I should think we'd have to go, seeing that he owns the place. You surely can't stay here if he doesn't want you to."

"I ain't a-goin'! You'll see what you'll see before I'm done with my stylish brother Sid!"

He tossed the paper aside and took a step nearer to her, his eyes caressing her, his hand raised to fondle her—while she, holding herself rigid, tried not to betray the repulsion that shook her to the foundations of her being. And just at that instant, before his clumsy hand had touched her, a sleepy cry from

Josie's room saved her. She sprang away from her husband and hurried to the baby's bedside.

Josie had had a bad dream and was frightened. Susan lifted him from his crib and sat down to rock him.

And now, for the first time in her acquaintance with her step-son, he suddenly responded to her mothering, clasping his fat little arms tight around her neck as she held him; nestling his curly head against her breast, cooing and murmuring lovingly in answer to her low-voiced singing to him.

It seemed to Susan that at the very first voluntary touch of those soft baby arms every thwarted motherly instinct of her heart became alive. An hour ago she had been plotting to cut loose from all the obligations imposed by her rash and foolish marriage. And now such a little thing, the clasp of a baby's arms, was binding her fast.

"I'll bear it for you, Josie, if you'll only love me," she whispered as she held him close.

Susan could date from that night a change in the boy. Whatever the trying peculiarities of his disposition, whatever his violent loyalty to his father in preference to her, he was nevertheless, after that night, her child, dependent upon her, jealously fond of her. And she, from that hour, became his faithful and devoted mother.

A week after Joe had dispatched his letter to Sidney, in which he refused to leave White Oak Farm, he came in one day at noon from the fields with a piece of news which he imparted to Susan at dinner.

"The housekeeper over at the big house has a letter from Sid's Missus where it says the house is to be got ready for 'em to come home with sich a house-party, nex' Sa'rday. Sid and his wife gets here a day ahead of their comp'ny—on Friday. The housekeeper she sent the butler to me to say she must

have green corn and fresh tomats and lettuce and grapes and Gawd knows what!"

Susan, looking very tired from her long morning's housework and cooking, made no comment, as she poured Joe's coffee and passed it to him across the table.

"It's bad enough fur a married man to have to keep so much hired help as what Sid keeps; but fur his Missus to be that good-for-nothing that he has to hire someone to do even the *managin'* yet—a house-keeper, mind you!—that's goin' *too* far! Somepin ought to be did about it!"

Susan, busily mashing Josie's baked potato, still made no comment.

"It's squanderin' money somepin fierce to hire so much! What good is his wife *to* him, anyhow? That's what I ast you!"

"Better ask what good is he *to* her," Susan remarked at last.

But this was a point of view too foreign to the domestic philosophy of a Pennsylvania Dutchman to be considered.

"He's her Mister," was Joe's conclusive response.

"There, now, Josie, dear," Susan said as she put the child's spoon in his hand when his potato was ready for him.

"Wants to be sed! Seed me, Musser!" protested Josie—f's being always s's in his language.

As he was quite able to feed himself and as Susan was feeling faint for food herself, she demurred, appealing to his pride—he was a great big boy now, not a baby any more; appealing also to his pity for her who couldn't eat any "din-din" if she had to feed a great big——

"Seed me! Seed me!" clamoured the boy.

"No, no, Josie must feed himself—like Father! Look at Father!—and let Mother eat her dinner."

"Wants to be sed!" howled Josie as Susan turned to her own plate. "Wants Musser to seed me!"

But Susan, taking up her knife and fork, ignored his cries.

Josie cast his spoon upon the floor, slunk down in his high chair, and sulked.

Susan paid no attention.

"He won't eat his dinner if you won't feed him, and he needs his dinner," Joe objected.

"He'll eat it if he gets hungry enough, Joe."

"He's too little to be tormented!"

"He won't suffer. If you don't interfere, he will soon give in."

"Wants to be sed!" whimpered Josie. "Seed me!"

Susan went on eating.

"If you won't I will," said Joe with an injured air, "and I ain't got the time to. Will you do it?"

If she had not been so very tired she might have stuck it out; but a lassitude of mind and body that made nothing seem worth while save peace and quiet led her to yield. She rose, picked up the child's spoon, and sat down again at his side.

Joe looked pleased and complacent.

Susan's heart reproached her as she thought, while she fed the child, "If he were my very own I'd love him too well to spoil him and make him detestable! I'd love him as a child ought to be loved. I must try—I must try!"

"When you stop to think," Joe resumed the discussion of his brother's affairs, "of all they'll spend over this here comp'ny they're havin' at Sid's—ten strangers, mind you! To stay from Sa'rday to Monday yet! Eatin' and carousin'! And a big bunch of hired people doin' all the work! And after all, what's *to* it, anyhow?"

"Your pet dissipation is making money—theirs,

spending it. I don't see much difference between you," said Susan, dully.

"Och, yes, but I work and purduce something fur other ones. They don't purduce nothing, that bunch, they only use up. They're like sich parasites."

"Hear your daddy, Josie, calling your uncle and aunt potato bugs!"

"Uncle Tater-Bug!" gurgled Josie.

His father chuckled. "See how quick he gets you?" he proudly drew Susan's attention to his son's precocity. "Yes, and potato bugs is what they are all right, Sid and his Missus!"

"I wonder whether society will ever learn how to exterminate its human potato bugs," Susan reflected. "But your real purpose in working, Joe, doesn't seem to me a bit higher than theirs in spending; you are both out to enjoy yourselves; you to carouse in your delightful accumulating and hoarding; they in playing. The effect on yourselves must be pretty much the same."

Josie being now comfortably replete with food and having come out conqueror in his demand to be fed, expressed his satisfaction by leaning caressingly against Susan, patting her cheek, and murmuring to her lovingly; a sight which his strangely jealous father never could stand for more than a minute at a time. Rising abruptly, he lifted the high chair to his side of the table.

"Does Josie want some of Pop's pie?" he bargained for the boy's favour; everything had a commercial value to Joe. "Nice apple pie," he said, holding a spoonful of the rich crust to Josie's lips.

"It's very bad for him," Susan objected, "that rich pastry."

"Och, this good whiles back, before you come, I fed pie to him," returned Joe.

"He'll be ill!" warned Susan.

"He's hearty; he kin eat what I eat. You put too much sugar in your pies; it's extravagant," Joe complained. "My sugar bill was too high last week. You ought to watch yourself better, Susan, how you use up sugar. You ain't been takin' no more cakes over to your folks at Reifsville, have you—since I tol' you not to?" he asked, suspiciously.

"No," she coldly answered.

"Well, but, Susan, it stands to reason," he argued, "that I done enough fur your folks. More'n some others would have did, seein' you didn't fetch me no aus tire. To be sure, I didn't need it, my house bein' nice furnished a'ready. But other ones would have expected something in place of a aus tire and I didn't ast nothin' off of you. And your sisters—where'd they be if I hadn't o' gave 'em a home yet, heh? You can't look to me to keep on doin' fur 'em! It stands to reason!"

All this because she had taken to Addie and Lizzie, one day, half the batch of "sand tarts" she had baked.

"Nor you ain't to sneak things to 'em behind my back!" warned Joe.

Susan, suddenly feeling ill and faint, rose from the table and left the room.

Joe, left alone with his boy, looked injured.

"Ain't got no right to say nawthin, seems!"

He didn't like being deserted like this at his meals—the only time he had through the day to be with his delectable bride. For even in her calico working frock and when tired out and "strubbled"* Susan was so very good to look at and so "nice to have 'round"; and she made him so very much more comfortable than his hired housekeepers had ever done.

*Hair mussed.

"Got to do my own stretchin', I guess!" he grumbled as he reached for the coffee pot to refill his cup. "She's got no need to be so touchy! She's just got to understand from the first that I ain't supportin' them sisters of hern."

Meantime Susan, lying on her bed, dry-eyed and staring at the wall, saw there on its blankness her tragically broken life.

"So much was done for me—so many sacrifices made—that I might have something better than they all had ever had! What a hideous, hideous mess I have made of it!"

That afternoon the four walls of her cottage seemed to close in upon her like a jail; she could not endure it. Against all precedent or reason she shamelessly abandoned a large basket of ironing, took Josie, and drove over in her husband's car to see her sisters.

She was never free from anxiety for them, for though they had tried hard to conceal it from her, she knew well what a hard struggle they were having to get along. The wages of the necessary hired man to till their land left them too little income. Susan saw only too clearly all the many little (and some big) deprivations they were suffering.

Joe was so well off (wasn't it a quarter of a million he had inherited from his uncle?)—he could so easily make life easier for her sisters——

Josie was asleep by the time she reached Reifsville. She left him lying on the seat of the car while she went into the house to find Lizzie and Addie.

The kitchen was empty; they were probably helping their hired man in the potato patch.

She went to the settee which stood against the kitchen wall (a settee being as much a part of a Pennsylvania Dutch kitchen as a cook stove) and arranged the cushions for Josie before she should bring him in; and while she was doing this she heard

two voices on the porch just outside the kitchen, a few feet from where she stood, her sister Lizzie's high-keyed tones answering a man's deep voice; and Susan was startled at the unusual sound, in this neighbourhood, of good English and a cultured accent.

"May I inquah how much ah tuh-nips?" he was asking with a hesitation which seemed to express a doubt as to whether he did not, perhaps, mean pumpkins.

"Did you ast what's turn-ups?" asked Lizzie, doubtfully.

"Not *what* they ah; how much they ah; by the bunch. I'm not shu-ah they grow in bunches, but it seems probable. Grapes do——"

"Och, no, turn-ups grows one by each that way. Didn't you know *that* much?" asked Lizzie with mild wonder, not meaning to be critical. "It don't seem as if any one could be that dumb as to think that turn-ups grewed in bunches yet! My souls! Our turn-ups," she added, "is all."

"All? Are they? All what?"

"They're *all*, I sayed."

"All—er—ripe?" ventured the man, tentatively, almost timidly.

"Och, I mean they was all solt at market; they're *all*."

"I surmise," responded the deep though gentle voice, "that these are agricultural terms with which I am unfamilyah. We'll let it pass. May I ask, ah you not a Mennonite, madam?"

"Yes, but I'm a Old."

"A Old?"

"I belong to the Old Mennonites."

"Are there, then, also, Young Mennonites?"

"*New* Mennonites," Lizzie corrected him with a little irrepressible chuckle of amusement.

"And what is the difference between the Old and the New?"

"The Old has more light." Lizzie stated an indisputable and obvious fact.

"It must be a comfort to you to know that," responded the man, sympathetically.

Susan's curiosity was aroused. She tiptoed to the window, carefully lifted a corner of the blind, and peeped.

Her heart gave a great leap in her bosom as she recognized, in the interesting looking young man standing at the porch steps, dressed in motoring cap and coat, wearing eye-glasses attached to a heavy black ribbon, an old acquaintance, the brother of one of those friends of her school days at whose home she had so often visited, whose letters she had left unanswered.

Robert Arnold, a rising author, had been one of her several ardent "followers" in those days a few years ago, which now seemed so far, far back in the past!

She saw that his car was standing in the road behind the house. What was he doing out here? Looking for local colour for stories, perhaps?

"In what way do the Old Mennonites have more light?" she heard him ask poor Lizzie.

"Well, us Old Mennonites ain't so narrer-minded like what the New is; we wear the waists of our frocks more fashionable, to come a little below the belt that way; you see?—where with the New, their waists must end at the belt. They claim thein is more after the Gawspel than what ourn is; but I don' know," said Lizzie, thoughtfully. "Sometimes, do you know, I think thein is just as fashionable. But I often says to my neighbour (she's a New—'Manda Slosser by name) I says, 'It ain't our clo'es that saves us,' I says, 'nor the name of our church, Old or New. You's New Mennonites,' I says, 'is a little narrer'."

"You are undoubtedly right," agreed Mr. Arnold. "By the way, can you tell me who is the school teacher of this village?"

"Emmy Slosser's her name. She lives next door to us here."

"Slosser? Are you sure? Isn't it Schrekengust?"

"Och, no, Susie give up the Reifsville school it's over a year ago a'ready."

"Susie! That's it! You know her?" cried Mr. Arnold, eagerly. "Where can I find her—Susan Schrekengust?"

"Are you acquainted to Susie then?" asked Lizzie, cautiously. Susan's sisters knew very well how she had tried, for over a year, to elude her old school friends in the city.

"My sister and Miss Susan were intimate friends," replied Mr. Arnold. "And I—Miss Schrekengust and I were very good friends, too. But we have not heard from her for over a year, though we have both written to her repeatedly. So, as a matter of fact, I came out here to-day to look her up, and *not* to inquah the price of tuh-nips. When I mentioned tuh-nips I was really only feeling my way a bit. Can you tell me where I can find Miss Schrekengust?"

"You can't find her," answered Lizzie. "She's moved away."

"I hope you can tell me, then, where she has gone?"

"Susie she got married and moved away."

"Married!"

Robert Arnold looked distinctly dismayed; Susan, watching from behind the blind, was sure of it.

"Yes, she got married," repeated Lizzie.

"But—but she never let her friends know! Whom did she marry?" asked Mr. Arnold in a tone of dejection.

"A party by the name of Joe Houghton she got married to."

"Houghton? No relation, I suppose, to Mr. Sidney Houghton of White Oak Farm?"

"Yes, Joe he's a half-brother of hisn."

"Indeed! Miss Schrekengust married into the Houghton family! Dear me!" murmured Mr. Arnold; and Susan heard in his tone, as plainly as though he had spoken, his surprise that she had so risen in the world from a humble little village school teacher. To be sure, Mr. Arnold had never seen Joe.

"Quite a rise in the world for Miss Schrekengust, eh?" he said to Lizzie, tentatively, as though putting out a feeler.

"Och, but our Susie she claims she had it a lot easier before she got married."

"Oh, these modern Feminists!—who think themselves utterly abused if they're not drudging for their own living!" cried Mr. Arnold.

"Yes, well, but Susie she's so much more fur her books and all like that than what she is fur house-work that I don't think she likes it wery good, bein' married. She enjoyed herself more singlewise; for all, they say you have anyhow trouble even if you ain't married. And it's true, too, fur I seen a lot of trouble a'ready," sighed Lizzie, "and I ain't got no Mister."

"I'm sorry to hear that our little friend isn't happy——"

"Well, you see, she's so grand educated that way, our Susie is, you couldn't expec' her to be satisfied with kitchen work all the time. Us we sent her to school till she was seventeen a'ready! Yes, indeed! If you knowed her so well, I don't have to tell you how good educated she is. Ain't I don't?"

"You—you are related to her?" asked Mr. Arnold, looking bewildered.

"Me, I'm her sister."

"Oh! And this is her home?"

"Yes, till she got married a'ready."

"If you are Susan's sister, I'm very glad to meet you," said Mr. Arnold, holding out his hand. "You must often have heard Susan speak of us—the Arnolds?"

"Och, yes! She went often a'ready to wisit at your grand place in Middleburg! Ain't? So you're Mr. Arnold! Well, well! It wonders me! Susie will be surprised to hear you come to look her up!"

"Does she live near here?"

"No, she lives off."

"Far off?"

"Well," said Lizzie, on her guard, "a good piece-ways off she lives."

"Can you give me her address?"

"I ain't got it wery handy."

"You—you don't want me to have it, Miss Schrekengust?"

"I—I'd have to ast Susie first," faltered Lizzie, embarrassed, "if she wants you to."

It was Mr. Arnold's turn, now, to look embarrassed. "I beg pardon, Miss Schrekengust, if I am trespassing! Miss Susan—Mrs. Houghton—has given us to understand plainly enough, I'm sure, that she did not care any longer for our friendship. But we've not found it very easy to give her up, you see—we—we—Will you tell her, please, when you write to her, or see her, that I called? And that my sister sends her love? And that we're not forgetting her and never shall? My sister and I are coming down next Saturday to White Oak Farm to a house party that Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Houghton are having (Mrs. Sidney Houghton is an old friend of my sister), and as we knew Susan lived in this vicinity, we thought we'd look her up. I came here to-day to try to find Susan and tell her we'd be in her neighbourhood for three

days and that she could not escape us! But of course—well, I shall be glad to have you tell her I called. Good-by, Miss Schrekengust,” he concluded, again offering his hand.

“But can’t you stop and pick a piece* first?” asked Lizzie, hospitably. “I can make supper done till a little while yet. To be sure, us we eat wery plain and common; but if you’ll just take it as it comes that way——”

“You are very kind and I appreciate your invitation, but——”

He murmured elaborate excuses and thanks, and was gone.

The blind dropped from Susan’s hand. She stood motionless, overcome, though her heart was beating fast. The sight of this old friend’s face, the sound of his voice, were bringing back overwhelmingly dear memories of happiness; arousing suddenly her slumbering youth which she had thought forever dead; stirring in her the old unconquerable love of life that had so abounded in her in days long past. The possibility of really living again and finding joy in life was borne in upon her with a rush.

Lizzie did not come into the kitchen. She had probably gone back at once to the truck patch to join Addie and the hired man. Susan felt, now, that she would rather not see her sisters this afternoon. She left the house and got into the car beside the still slumbering Josie.

On her way home she tried to visualize clearly the situation in which she found herself. Here were her old, close, and loved friends, Eleanor and Robert Arnold, who were at the same time friends of her sister-in-law, coming to the Houghtons’ house party. And here was she, living in the tenant-farmer’s

*“Pick a piece”—have a luncheon.

cottage within a stone's throw of "the big house"—so far from being one of her sister-in-law's house party that she was not even acquainted with her. A unique situation, truly! It almost moved her to laughter.

"I suppose I can, if I want to, manage to keep out of sight of the guests for a day or two, but I certainly could not manage it for longer."

To present Joe to the Arnolds as her husband!

"And Robert thinks it must be such a pleasant change from school teaching to have married into the Houghton family!"

It would give Robert and Eleanor a dreadful shock to find her married to an individual like Joe! And it wasn't a thing you could decently explain. You didn't go about apologizing for the crudity of your husband as you might for the incompetence of your cook!

She remembered Sidney's having once said to her, "I never could see why Uncle George resented Joe's marrying a farmer's servant girl; no *lady* would ever have married him!"

When she reached home, the question she had been pondering during all her eight-mile drive still remained unsolved—should she yield to this stirring of new life in her heart, to which the sight of Robert Arnold had given birth; meet her old friends and put her situation to the test; let it either work itself out into something that would perhaps make life of worth to her once more, or throw her back again upon herself, into a deeper solitude than ever? If the latter, she would have only herself to blame; certainly she could not reproach her friends, since by her own acts she had placed herself where even the most broad-minded and charitable of those who had cared for her must find that the price of friendship with her was rather greater than it was worth.

CHAPTER IX

THE HOUSE PARTY

MR. AND MRS. SIDNEY HOUGHTON found themselves alone together longer and more intimately in their Pullman drawing-room, on their homeward journey from Newport to White Oak Farm, than they had been at any time in the past six weeks. Even Georgie was not by to disturb their tête-à-tête, for his mother had established him and his nurse in a section of another car; not, indeed, to insure her uninterrupted isolation with her husband, but in order to escape any possibility of annoyance from the child.

This detachment of the young couple, however, from all the world, during a ten-hours' journey, did not appear to conduce greatly to their happiness. They were both looking rather jaded from their recently overdone social life; their faces bore the stamp of that discontent and weakness which will so soon mar the countenances of those who live to no purpose; who, while giving no sort of service to society, prey upon those who do serve. They seemed to have nothing to talk about together; and this absolute absence of any common interests was a dreary manifestation of the deadly emptiness of their pleasure-seeking lives. They read newspapers and magazines, but did not speak to each other of what they read. They loafed, ate, yawned, slept. Once for five minutes they did become a little animated over a delectable bit of Newport scandal.

But they quickly lapsed again into lassitude and boredom.

In repose Sidney's face looked more than discontented. He was evidently nervous and worried.

He made frequent visits to the next car to see Georgie. But Mrs. Houghton never went near the little boy during the entire trip, nor was the child brought by his nurse to see her.

It was toward the end of their journey that she roused herself to discuss with her husband the entertainment of the house party which was to arrive at White Oak Farm the day after their return home.

"If the wine you ordered from New York doesn't come in time, what shall we do? You can't give the Fairfaxes and the Sherwins the sort of stuff you'd buy in Middleburg," she said.

"Of course not. Let us hope it *will* come in time," he replied.

"It's rather absurd, you know, our trying to entertain such people as the Fairfaxes and the Sherwins at White Oak Farm; we haven't enough to offer them. Nothing, indeed, but a rather attractive old homestead! We ought not to have undertaken it, really. You were foolish to insist upon it. You know, my dear, you do have rather vulgar ambitions!"

"As usual, you misunderstand me, Laura. It's not 'vulgar ambition' that makes me want to return the very great hospitality we've been accepting from both those families."

"They will probably be bored to death!" Mrs. Houghton shrugged. "That's why I asked the Arnolds, when I found that the Fairfaxes admired Robert's magazine stories. And Eleanor is always good company."

"It was a good idea," Sidney agreed, "to ask the Arnolds. I'm glad you thought of it."

And then suddenly, with a violent mental jolt, he remembered something—it was Eleanor Arnold who, at a “frat” dance, nearly three years ago, had introduced him to Susan Schrekengust! The Arnolds knew Susan! *Why* had he not remembered it before?—in time to stop that invitation!

“*Now* what the devil’s to pay!” he thought in utter consternation.

“Robert and Eleanor will certainly help to make things go,” said his wife, serenely.

“Help to make things go to hell!” he thought with an inward frenzy of apprehension.

“It’s damned awkward that Joe won’t move away, isn’t it?” he appealed, in a shaking voice, to his wife.

Laura glanced at him in surprise. His face was distorted with anxiety.

“Dear me, you take it tragically, don’t you? Why don’t you *make* him go? Your reasons for tolerating him have never been very clear to me.”

“He can injure us! He has suspicions about Georgie! He’d be only too glad to have White Oak Farm go to *his* boy! I dare not offend him—I——”

“Oh, bother! For the sake of that child you are letting your whole life be spoiled! I’ve no patience with you!”

Sidney shrank away from her into a huddled heap and did not answer.

“It certainly is to be hoped,” she said, presently, “that our guests won’t discover your relationship to your hired farmer living in the tenant’s cottage!”

“It’s a beastly situation!” exclaimed Sidney.

“And for the sake of that child you endure it! You might consider *me* a little and not subject me to such embarrassment!”

“I’m as much embarrassed as you are! But, Laura,” he pleaded, “don’t try to make me be false to the decentest thing in me—my love for Georgie!”

"When your love for him makes you sacrifice me, you can't expect me to get enthusiastic about it! And now there's that girl your brother has married—it's to be hoped she won't presume upon family ties to intrude upon us! However," Laura suddenly dismissed the whole matter with another shrug of her shoulders, "let us drop the subject! I simply don't intend to let people like that prey upon my mind!"

"But you'll *have* to let them prey upon your mind if the Arnolds and the rest of them discover Joe! He'll take good care to *let* himself be known, I'm afraid!"

"Then why on earth did you insist upon having this party?"

"I didn't ask the Arnolds."

"But the others. Why, if you *won't* make your brother leave, do you subject yourself and me to the humiliation of entertaining a house party where he will be all over the landscape in his shirt sleeves or overalls, talking that crazy Pennsylvania Dutch lingo he has and making us ridiculous!"

"I—I thought a crowd of guests would cover the awkwardness of your not calling on Joe's wife—I——"

Laura laughed with genuine amusement. "Call on her! I! She'd hardly expect it, Sidney, I should think!"

"Why not? It seems to me it's just what she *would* expect!"

"Does it? Well, you and I never do seem to see anything under heaven from the same point of view! But I should think even you would realize the absurdity of suggesting that I call on your tenant-farmer's wife!—even if she is your sister-in-law. Any girl that *could* marry that half-brother of yours would be impossible!"

"She isn't!" Sidney broke forth with a hot im-

petuosity that amazed himself. But almost instantly he became cautious again. "She—she does not look impossible, Laura," he concluded, tamely.

"I didn't know you had met her. Have you?"

"I—I saw her one day in front of the cottage."

"She can't possibly be the girl I saw one day on the lawn at White Oak, coming from Joe's cottage. That girl was—well, she was pretty and stylish and well-bred looking. I thought she was someone who had come to call on me—no, it's not possible that Joe could have married a girl like that!"

"But remember, Joe's rich enough to have baited bigger game than that little school teacher!"

"No amount of riches, with your brother Joe tacked on, could have been a bait big enough to lure a really nice girl, Sidney. You know that perfectly well."

"Have it your own way!" he crossly retorted.

His mind was torn with a dozen conflicting fears. He was afraid of Joe's resentment if Laura did not call on Susan; yet feared a betrayal of his guilty secret if the two women did meet. Association with or aloofness from his brother's household seemed equally dangerous and impossible. He feared a scandal; he feared Laura's indignation and resentment; he feared the loss to his son of his inheritance. And he did not in the least know how to meet any of these dangers that menaced him.

Mingled with his fears were other emotions not so unworthy: a deep self-abasement, never absent from his heart, for the injury he had done and was doing to Susan; a great sense of loss and emptiness because of the wonderful comradeship as well as of the great love that had been theirs; a painful humiliation in the realization of Susan's deep contempt for him.

But presently the quite practical and sordid difficulty that was causing him, just now, intense

anxiety, overshadowed all the other troubles of his mind.

"Another devil of a mess," he said to his wife, "my being obliged to get some ready money right away! My losses over those damned races have just exactly wiped out over a year's income!"

"Don't look to me," she warned him. "I shan't give you another dollar of *my* income, Sidney! You already owe me half my year's allowance! And of course I am perfectly aware, my dear, that you'll never dream of paying it back to me!"

"I shan't have to—because you'll manage to *get* it back!" he retorted.

"I shall do my best to," she blandly answered.

"I don't have to worry about *you*! I've got enough of your unpaid bills in my desk to cover more than all you've loaned me!"

"See that you pay them!"

"I shall have to borrow money from Joe," he said, hopelessly.

"Why do you get it from *him*? Why not from someone else? He demands such awfully tight security—first thing you know *he'll* own everything you inherited from your uncle."

"I borrow from him because he's got it to lend and money's scarce just now. He read in the papers of my heavy losses in the races and he wrote and *offered* to lend me money. Pretty decent of him, wasn't it? I guess—I guess," faltered Sidney, "he's feeling extra good and happy just now—with his new wife and——"

He rose abruptly.

"I'll run over and see how Georgie's getting along."

But he did not go to Georgie. He went, instead, to the day-coach smoking car, sat down on the very last seat, and lit a cigar.

He had found it necessary to escape precipitately

from Laura to conceal from her a threatened flood of emotion. Ever since he had first learned of Susan's inexplicable marriage to Joe he had been astonished and disgusted by his own overwhelming and unreasonable jealousy, envy, chagrin—all the more absurd because Susan could not possibly care for Joe.

He wondered now, for the hundredth time, as he drearily gazed out of the window upon the autumn-coloured wooded hills that sped by, what had made Susan do it. He had been entirely insincere in suggesting to his wife that Joe's money had been the bait. Laura had answered truly that the money of a Croesus, with Joe attached, could not have tempted "a nice girl."

Did Susan, perhaps, have a suspicion——

No, that was impossible; quite, quite impossible.

The Schrekengusts had been in dire straits; Susan had lost her school, Mr. Schrekengust had died, their property was mortgaged, the elder sisters were getting on in years; had Joe deliberately driven that lovely girl into a corner and forced her to bargain with him for the livelihood of those dear to her? It would be like him! Oh, it would be like him! And she—rather than accept help from her "betrayed"—had preferred this marriage!

"How she must loathe me!" he inwardly groaned.

He sighed profoundly as he thought what delight he himself would have found in using his wealth to give comfort and happiness to Susan!

"What a mate she'd have been! My life couldn't have been so sordid with her at my side!—her zest for life, her fun, her intelligence, her warm, tender heart, her loveliness! That *Joe* should have all that! Oh, damn!"

However, he could not waste himself upon futile regrets while this new danger stared him in the face

—those Arnolds were bound to see Susan and recognize her!

The one mortal dread of his life, these days, was that Laura should discover Susan's identity.

"My predicament is perfectly ridiculous! And dangerous! Damned dangerous!"

But though from the very hour of his arrival at home he found himself, in spite of all his apprehensions, thrilling at the fact of Susan's nearness, peering through every window he passed for a possible glimpse of her about the grounds or near her cottage, he was nevertheless immensely relieved to find that she seemed to be assiduously keeping herself out of sight.

She, meantime, was experiencing almost as many qualms and emotions as was Sidney himself. The sudden awakening of her old self which the sight and sound of her girlhood's friend, Robert Arnold, had brought to her, gave her a haunting, wistful longing to meet and greet him and his sister again, even while it revealed to her more poignantly than ever the hopeless degradation of her marriage; a degradation so much more real than that of her tragic betrayal at Sidney's hands.

"To have to feel ashamed of your husband!" she would muse over her household drudgery (for such it was to her because her heart was not in it). "Ashamed of the one nearest to you in all the world!—to whom you would naturally *want* to feel only loyalty—I am ashamed of being ashamed!"

She reflected that if her own deep and strong feelings about some things were natural, then society must have very distorted standards.

"The things usually considered shameful!" she thought, wonderingly. "And the things that are considered respectable!"

Life seemed to her an inexplicable muddle; all

her old standards of right and wrong in confusion; the very foundations of the universe knocked out from under her.

It was on Saturday afternoon, when the house party was gathered about a tea table on the lawn, that one of the guests, Mrs. Fairfax, a comely young matron, drew attention to the picturesque little cottage behind the big white house.

"A tenant's cottage, I suppose, Mr. Houghton?"

"The farmer's, yes," Sidney nodded.

"Pretty! So cosy! I can imagine being quite happy in a dear little home like that, with no servant worries, no tiresome social obligations, freedom for doing what I love to do—read and dig a garden and study music; no fears of a jealous and outraged mob bringing retribution upon me for having enjoyed such ease and comfort all my life as *they've* never had a chance at, poor things! Oh, I believe I'd love it!"

"What hinders your having it, Mrs. Fairfax?" asked Eleanor Arnold, "if you really mean that you'd love it?"

Miss Arnold was a young girl of an arresting personality. There was a self-contained calm in her way of sitting very still, her capable-looking hands folded in her lap, her clear, direct gaze shining out of a pale face encircled in thick braids of straight, dark hair. She was keenly and critically observant, yet seemed not unsympathetic.

"What hinders me? *That!*" Mrs. Fairfax pointed a forefinger across the table at her husband, a rather foppishly dressed, futile-looking person who lived in idleness on his "unearned increments".

"Nuff said," nodded Eleanor, who yearned to add, "Do you think 'that' worth the sacrifice of two minutes of your short life?"

"It makes me laugh," said Mr. Fairfax, "to hear

Jane talk about yearning for the simple life! If any one was ever born that was more dependent than Jane upon all her little comforts and conveniences—lead me to her! *Jane* wouldn't have any trouble meeting that test of royal blood, you wot of, in the fairy story—a maiden's sensitiveness to a pea pod under several mattresses—a *pile* of mattresses! Jane would feel that pea pod quicker'n your royal princess, I bet you! Don't you know, Janie," he appealed to her, "that the farmer's wife in yonder humble cot, whom you are envying, does her own washing and baking and scrubbing and cooking and——"

"Don't spoil the sweet picture I had made for myself," protested Jane, sentimentally, "of rural peace and simplicity, with leisure for congenial occupations, such as we of our class never have! Let me believe, Will, dear, that *some* people in this world do lead satisfying lives!"

"Moles and cows do perhaps," responded her husband as he rose and strolled over to a rustic bench under a tree behind the tea table, where pretty young Mrs. Sherwin made room for him by her side.

"Mr. Arnold!" Mrs. Fairfax turned to the young author, Robert Arnold, whose thoughtful, earnest face stood out in marked contrast to the unintelligent and somewhat coarse countenances of the other three men of the group, "you have the honour and distinction of meeting a long-felt want in my life! I've always yearned to know—really *know*—a distinguished novelist whose books I've loved. But now I find to my dismay that the yearning, like that for 'strong drink,' as the W. C. T. U's call it, increases in proportion as it's gratified! So I beg and implore you, Mr. Arnold, to bring an author or two to see me every time you come to the city. Will you?"

"But 'author' is such a very general term! Please, I beg you, be specific. What special brand of author are you yearning to meet? I might grab the wrong kind. There are so many varieties; there is, for instance, the red-blooded variety; there is the precious-lavender-and-lace kind; there is the gosh-ding-it sort; the Close-to-Nature style; the cabaret brand; the week-end-on-Long-Island-society sort—and many others. So, please, kind lady, name your brand."

"The kind I'm yearning to meet is the author who reads and understands women, Mr. Arnold," said Jane with an earnest intensity.

"But Shakspeare's been dead some time. Ask me something easy."

"I'll tell you the brand you *don't* want to introduce to our wives!" Mr. Andrew Sherwin, a ruddy, heavily built banker, warned the author. "The kind that will put ideas into their heads! Keep 'em off! Jane, there, and my wife, too," nodding toward the tree behind the tea table where Mrs. Sherwin sat with Mr. Fairfax, "laps up ideas as a cat laps milk! For God's sake keep off authors with ideas!"

"Don't worry! Authors, these days, don't deal in ideas, only style. We leave ideas to bankers."

"Well, *I've* met one or two writing chaps that were just chuck full of stuff—new ideas about human brotherhood; impracticable rot like that! This is no time for new ideas! We've got trouble enough to keep things going smoothly!"

"No time for new ideas?" repeated Arnold, grinning. "I suppose that's what the Romans and Jews told Jesus; and what the Diet of Worms told Luther; and what the Roman Catholics told Galileo when he got hold of the very dangerous new idea that the world moved; they weren't ready to have it move; it greatly annoyed them to have it

move! It suited their vested interests to have it remain as stable as they'd always thought it!"

"That's different," protested Sherwin a little bewildered. "That's history. I'm talking about the present."

"Which is history, too."

"Are you a Socialist?" asked Sherwin, suspiciously.

"Of course he's not!" exclaimed Mrs. Fairfax, indignantly. "Don't be rude and insulting, Andrew! As if a man who is a gentleman could advocate his wife's sitting down to visit with the washwoman; and then those community kitchens Socialists would have—how absurd to suppose that *we* could eat the food that labourers like!"

"Are you under the impression, dear madam, that you are discussing Socialism?" asked Mr. Arnold.

"Of course I am! Aren't I?"

"Not any brand I ever heard of."

"What is the bloomin' thing then?" she asked, plaintively.

"It is what we of the privileged class must inevitably oppose, because fundamentally it means (as I understand it) giving everyone an equal chance in the race of life; which would, I fear, find some of *us* in very different places from those we now occupy. Some peasants who are incipient aristocrats intellectually or spiritually, like Gorky or Robert Burns, would forge ahead of the line which some of *us* hold—while we'd fall far back, perhaps, into the peasant ranks——"

"We don't propose to submit, in this country," exclaimed Sherwin, indignantly, "to the rule of any one class!"

"But that's what we always have submitted to. In all nations, in all times, the labouring class has submitted to the rule of the capitalistic class. The strong have ever ruled, and the strong have been the

capitalists. In our day it seems to be coming about that the workers are going to be the strong——”

“This constant menace of changing our fundamental institutions,” interrupted Sherwin, “ought to be suppressed by law! It can only lead to chaos!”

“Well,” returned Arnold, serenely, “out of chaos came heaven and earth. But I never heard of anything good coming out of ‘suppression’ and autocracy. By the way, Mr. Houghton,” Arnold closed the discussion by turning to Sidney, “you have a brother, haven’t you? Joseph’s his name?”

“A half-brother.”

“Does he live in this neighbourhood?”

“Ye—yes—ah, excuse me a minute, please, will you? I’ll—I’ll be back in a minute,” responded Sidney, leaving the table abruptly and striding away across the lawn.

But both Eleanor and Robert Arnold saw, as he left them, that his face had gone white at Robert’s question.

Eleanor turned to Mrs. Houghton. “Robert and I have just heard, Laura, that your brother-in-law has married my old school friend, Susan Schrekengust. How lucky you are to have acquired anything so delightful in the way of a sister-in-law as Susan! Don’t you think you are?”

“I’ve never seen her—but——”

“I thought,” said Eleanor, as Laura hesitated, “that I understood Mr. Houghton to say they lived in this neighbourhood.”

“They’ve just been married—and we’ve been away. Will you have some hot tea? You must be mistaken, Eleanor,” Laura added in a lower tone intended only for Eleanor’s ear, as she refilled her cup; “no friend of yours would have married Joe Houghton; he’s a perfect boor! Some mistake, my dear.”

"There must be," said Eleanor, surprised. "Susan would never have married a perfect boor!"

"Rather not!" corroborated Robert who had caught his sister's low-spoken remark.

"The girl Sidney's half-brother married," Laura explained, "was a country school teacher, I understand; you couldn't have known her."

"But Susan was a country school teacher!" said Eleanor.

"And," added Robert, "Susan's own sister told me she had married Sidney's brother. You must be mistaken, Laura, about Sidney's brother. He's evidently a diamond in the rough, for Susan to have married him. Where do they live?"

"Sidney will give you their address," answered Laura, turning away to speak to Mrs. Sherwin and Mr. Fairfax behind her.

"Want some hot tea back there?"

Robert and Eleanor exchanged a swift glance over the too-palpable fact that the Houghtons had something to conceal about their brother's marriage.

Their unwilling attention was presently forced upon the chatter of Mrs. Fairfax who loved nothing so much as to talk about herself, her "moods," her unique characteristics, her "reactions" upon her environment and its "reactions" upon her; she was either too self-absorbed as she would talk on and on interminably, or too lacking in imagination, ever to sense the boredom of her hearers.

Mrs. Houghton had gone into the house to answer a telephone call, so the six guests—the Arnolds, the Sherwins, the Fairfaxes—were left to themselves; the Arnolds, Mrs. Fairfax, and Mr. Sherwin, the portly banker, being gathered about the tea table, while Mrs. Sherwin and Mr. Fairfax sat a few yards away under the tree.

"It's the very strangest thing about me!" Mrs.

Fairfax was saying, leaning back in her wicker chair in an utter abandonment to an orgy of self-analysis, to which her three hearers might or might not listen, she didn't notice, "The way my moods never seem to match William's moods. If he happens to be in a sentimental mood, asking me how much I still care, and all that sort of thing—you know—then I'm just likely to be feeling utterly matter-of-fact and talk about dances or motors or making fudge! It is so odd! And if I happen to be sentimental and want to talk of my moods or feelings, or of my serious thoughts, then he's apt to want to talk about a baseball game! It *is* so queer! *Isn't* it? And yet, William and I are so perfectly mated! We understand each other so perfectly; we have no interests apart from each other; we do everything together—*everything!*"

"There's one thing you don't do together," said Eleanor, wickedly, pointing to the bench under the tree which she alone faced; and they all turned to see this sentimental lady's husband kissing rather too ardently Mrs. Sherwin's white hand.

"We trust each other perfectly, William and I," Mrs. Fairfax responded, undaunted. But she rose to stroll away, and Mr. Sherwin, more alarmed at the prospect of being left alone with the formidable and confusing conversation of the Arnolds than at the continuation of Mrs. Fairfax's monologue, rose also with as much alacrity as his corpulence permitted and went with her.

"Isn't it a tragical or comical irony of fate," remarked Robert Arnold when he and his sister were left alone, "that the feminine egotist, the woman who is most interested in herself, is the very least interesting to other people."

"It's rather deadly here, isn't it?" sighed Eleanor. "I'm getting lots of story stuff!"

"Yes! Of such 'stuff' are stories made; some stories."

"It isn't necessary, my dear, for you to try to counteract that woman's flattery."

"Do you suppose, Robert, that Mr. Andrew Sherwin ever reads *any* thing?"

"Well, no one ever caught him at it."

"I had so counted on finding dear old Susan here! I'm horribly disappointed! How refreshing she'd be!"

"They act as though they had her concealed in a tower!" said Robert.

"They do conceal their baby! I've not had a glimpse of him. You'd never know they had a baby, would you?"

"Go easy, my dear! It might be deformed or something; don't inquire for it," Robert warned her.

"I'll be discreet."

"Discreet? You? I'm not asking the impossible! Only don't jump in with both feet."

Meantime, Sidney, to escape Arnold's questions, and to conceal the betraying embarrassment they had caused, had walked away to the back of the house to get himself in hand.

But from the terrace behind the house he saw something which served greatly to augment his agitation—Georgie and his nurse going down the path which led straight to Joe's little cottage.

With a quick thrill of apprehension Sidney leapt down the slope to check them.

"I've *told* that girl to keep him away from there," he muttered angrily to himself.

But his interference came too late. With his heart in his mouth, he saw, as he stopped and stood stock still to watch, Susan sitting with Josie on the grass under a tree in front of her house, holding out her arms to Georgie, who was toddling straight toward

her with his hands outstretched to take hers. Evidently the two were good friends and this was not their first meeting!

The very thing he had been dreading! Were his worst fears to be realized?

With a bound he stood in the midst of them, his face as white as chalk, his chair dishevelled, his eyes wild. He seized Georgie almost out of Susan's arms, casting a glance of angry reproach at the nurse, as he perched the boy high on his shoulders.

"Why do you bring him here to annoy this lady?" he harshly demanded of the maid.

But Georgie, who usually welcomed his father with rapture, now kicked and struggled to free himself, to reach the goal for which he had been making so eagerly.

"Down, Daddy! Me down!" he clamoured, wriggling like an eel, sliding down his father's arm to the ground and rushing to Susan.

"You kin see fo' yo'se'f, Mistah Houghton!" the nurse defended herself. "I tries to keep him away f'om her like you tells me to, but I cayn't! The minute he's outdo's he wants to run down heah to his aunty and his li'l cousin. An' anyhow he don' git no *harm* here, Mistah Houghton!"

Sidney, with throbbing heart, gazed down upon the picture on the grass at his feet, his little son in Susan's arms, their faces close, the child's eyes and hers seeming to melt into each other, himself disregarded——

Suddenly Josie, his face distorted with jealous rage, had his fingers in Georgie's curls. Georgie, howling, retaliated valiantly by pulling at Josie's hair, and a tug of war followed which was stopped only by the combined efforts of Sidney and Susan to separate the combatants.

When peace had been restored by Susan's placing a

boy on either side of her impartially, Sidney abruptly ordered the nurse to go back to the house. "I'll bring Georgie home," he said.

As soon as the girl had turned the corner and disappeared around the cottage he threw himself on the grass at Susan's feet.

"Look here, Susan," he exclaimed in mingled indignation and fear, "did you marry Joe Houghton to avenge yourself on *me*? Just to keep me in hot water by your living here at my door! And *is* it you that is keeping Joe here on this place when I want to be rid of him? If my guess is wrong, then *what*, in the name of God, made you marry him?"

"You did!" came Susan's swift, breathless answer. "I married him to save my mother from being bribed by you to leave her old home! I thought it would kill her to go! And then," her voice quivered; "after all, my sacrifice was for nothing. Mother died a month after my marriage!"

"You blame *me* for your marrying him!" exclaimed Sidney.

"I believe my father died of worry and grief; I tried to save Mother from the same fate by marrying Joe, so that she need not yield to your bribe or threat or whatever it was that you held over her to force her from her home!"

"Oh, Susan! I've done you even greater wrong than I realized!"

"It's the wrong that I've done to myself that matters!" she said, sadly. "If I'd had any sense, if I'd been worth anything, you couldn't have wronged me!"

"I'm not happy, Susan! I don't believe I'll ever be happy again!"

"Gracious! Do you think you deserve to be?"

"But that *I* should have driven you to marrying a

fellow like Joe—you! He's so utterly unworthy of you—so——”

“Not more so than you were, God knows! Joe's at least ruggedly honest. He wouldn't lie and steal and—oh, your boasted Houghton blood seems to me very bad blood! If our child had lived I'd have hoped she'd have none of it; that she'd inherit only the clean, upright, simple soul of my father!”

“Let us be thankful she didn't live, Susan!” he said, his eyes shifting from hers—but coming back surreptitiously to note the effect of his words.

“That I must be thankful for that is, as I told you, the one thing I can never, never forgive you for!”

“And you will, then, take your vengeance upon me,” he said, fearfully, “by making trouble for me with my wife?”

“I think I told you before that ‘vengeance’ has no appeal for me. I am not enough interested in your life, Sidney, to go out of my way either to help or to harm you.”

“I've harmed *you* so much, it's hard for me to believe you wouldn't use your present great opportunities to—to come back!”

“Yes, you *would* believe that!” she said, listlessly.

Sidney tugged at the grass savagely. “Oh, I know you think I'm all sorts of a cad!” he said.

“Naturally.”

He groaned inwardly; he had meant to lead up tactfully to a hint or a plea that she keep out of the way of the Arnolds while they were here; but the tone of their conversation was certainly not propitious for such a suggestion! It might have the effect of making her deliberately and perversely seek them out! Better trust to luck that she and they would not discover each other.

“Just remember, Susan,” he warned her, his face

flushing, "you have kept rather a dark secret, yourself, from your husband!"

She regarded him with that look of impersonal speculation which he found so irritating to his vanity, as she asked, "You are capable of threatening me?"

"Joe certainly doesn't know your past!" he answered, sombrely.

"Oh!" she cried, a light coming into her eyes, "you've given me an idea! *That* might be my way of escape!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm bound by my bargain to stick to Joe; he gave Mother and my sisters their home. But if he should divorce *me*, that would let me out honourably!"

"But," said Sidney, seeing too late his mistake in having given her this "idea," "it would betray to Laura who you are!"

"Even *you*, Sidney, will hardly go so far as to ask me to live on with Joe just to spare 'Laura' and you! You've really given me an idea! I'll think it over."

"And if you act on it," he burst out, "you'll ruin me! You'll ruin Georgie! It will give the whole damned business away! It will——"

He suddenly closed his lips, as he realized, with despair, that he himself would in a moment be giving "the whole damned business away" if he said another word.

Springing to his feet, he snatched up Georgie, who kicked rebelliously at being taken from Susan, and with a hasty "Good-by, Susanna!" he strode away.

"You're takin' it easy; ain't?"

It was Joe's voice just at her back!

Evidently he had come in noiselessly from the potato patch. He had a way of appearing unexpectedly, at any hour of the day, with the purpose,

apparently, of catching her unawares in idleness, a thing he abhorred; because in his Gospel, Time was Money.

As she wondered how much, if anything, he had overheard of her talk with Sidney, she found herself feeling remarkably unconcerned about it. She certainly had little to lose and perhaps much to gain if Joe should learn the truth about her.

"Been havin' comp'ny, seems."

He came forward, seating himself in the swing under the tree and taking Josie on his knee.

"Your brother came down for his boy."

"And stopped to wisit you, heh?"

"Yes."

"He better *not* come flirtin' and foolin' round my wife!" growled Joe, jealously.

Susan made no comment.

"It ain't the thing!—him and you loafin' here and me workin'!"

She silently leafed the pages of the magazine on her lap.

"Have you got supper made, that you have so much time to loaf?"

Susan did not answer.

"I ast have you got supper made. Why don't you answer to me, Susan?"

"I'll answer you, Joe, when you are civil to me."

"Civil! I got to be civil, must I? To my own wife yet! Huh! I guess I got to be so pernicketty nice like what Sid is; ain't?"

Susan scarcely heard him; her mind was revolving that "way of escape" that Sidney had suggested.

"Seems you're got an awful lot of time to set round, Susan! I bet you wouldn't have, if you done all that's to *be* done."

But he could draw no answer from her with this bait.

"You ain't near so pertikkler with the housework as what my first wife was. You don't hang out the nice wash she hung out! She hung out the nicest wash in White Oak Station; all the folks sayed so. They might say that of *yourn* if you took more time to it, instead of hurryin' through so's you can set out here and enjoy yourself."

But when even these aspersions on her "wash" did not rouse Susan to resentment, Joe felt discouraged.

"What was Sid gassin' to you about, anyhow?" he inquired, sullenly.

"We talked about our children," she said after a perceptible hesitation.

"Huh! I guess he thinks hisn's better'n mine!—the way him and his mother always thought I wasn't good enough to 'sociate with 'em! Well, by gosh, Susan, they'll learn somepin different one of these here days! Josie ain't a-goin' to have to take no back seat fur that there bastard of Sid's, you bet you! It'll be the other way round, you mark my words!"

"Georgie was born in wedlock," Susan protested, startled.

"I'd like to prove he *wasn't*!" growled Joe.

"Oh, Joe, if you could only see how much more your hatred of Sidney hurts you than it does him, your very selfishness would make you want to get over it!"

"It'll hurt Sid a-plenty before I do get over it!" returned Joe. "When I've got Sid where I want him—and that's under my heel—then mebbby I'll get good over hatin' him. Not *till* then, though!"

Susan sighed, but protested no further.

"Did Sid explain you why his Missus don't take no notice to you—you her sister-in-law?" Joe demanded.

Susan shook her head.

"Don't it spite you none, Susan, that she thinks herself so much?" he asked, puzzled.

"It's her loss, not mine," smiled Susan. "I think people who don't know me miss a lot. Don't you, Joe?"

She rose and shook out her skirts.

"Please be ready for supper in half an hour," she said, as she left him and went into the kitchen.

In spite of the sharp reprimand which Sidney administered that day, on his return home, to Clara, Georgie's nurse, for disobeying his orders to keep the boy as far away as possible from his uncle's cottage, she, true to her race, rather than exert herself to struggle with the child's strong will, or to divert and amuse him, continued to take the line of least resistance and to follow where he led, when, the moment he was out of the house, he would make straight for the little cottage at the foot of the hill; and Susan, at whose heart strings Georgie's tug was growing more and more potent, did not discourage the girl's bringing him daily to see his little cousin and his "aunty."

Thus it happened that the very next day after Sidney's stern rebuke and reiterated command to obey orders on pain of being discharged (those were the days when servants, not employers, were discharged), Clara again deliberately let her small master lead her, after luncheon when everybody was taking a nap, directly down to the spot where Sidney had found them the day before.

Now as it was Sunday and Joe, who hated Sidney's boy, was about the house to-day, Susan would have preferred, for once, to have had Georgie kept away. But it happened that at the moment of his joyful arrival, slowly followed by his spineless attendant, Joe was having a nap after his heavy noon meal;

and so, Susan, deciding that at the first sound of her husband's awaking she would dispatch her visitors in haste, settled herself cosily, with a child on either side of her and her lap full of story books, under the tree outside her house.

And it was here that, presently, Eleanor Arnold, wandering about alone, found her.

It came with a great shock to them both, that first recognizing encounter of their eyes. For an instant they could only stare at each other, speechless. But the next moment they had fallen upon each other with cries of surprise and delight, Eleanor's self-contained composure entirely broken up, and Susan's habitual listlessness turned to a burning excitement.

"But, Susan! I didn't know you at first! You are so changed! Your golden hair turned brown! And the look out of your eyes—what is it?"

Susan dared not speak lest a flood of tears overwhelm her. She bit her lip hard as she silently drew Eleanor to sit down with her on the grass under the tree.

But in a moment she had recovered herself, and putting the two boys to playing with some building blocks, she gave herself up to her friend. Both she and Eleanor were feeling amazed, in their hearts, that their sudden reunion was bringing instantaneously such a rush of old joy, such a quick renewal of a vital tie after so long a breach. Their eyes sparkled, their cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"How have we lived so long without each other, Susan!" cried Eleanor, breathlessly.

And Susan answered, "What months we've wasted! I'm only this moment realizing what you've always been to me!"

"It's been your doing, not mine, that we've been separated, Susan!"

"Oh, I know——"

"But you are surely not living here in this house?" Eleanor asked, looking bewildered. "Why, Laura said she had never met you! Then you can't have married Sidney's brother?"

"Yes to all your questions. I am living right here in this house; I am Sidney's sister-in-law; his wife never met me."

"Family mysteries and skeletons? Well, I won't pry—though I'm dying to! *Why* you should have gone and got married and have had these two children without ever consulting me——"

"One of them is Sidney Houghton's," Susan quickly explained.

"One of these two? Which one is yours, Susan? Oh, you needn't tell me, it's plain enough! What a darling! Much, much more adorable," she added in a lowered voice, "than Sidney's."

"I don't think so!" Susan warmly retorted. "Georgie seems to me a much finer type than Josie—though of course," she hastily added, "Josie's a dear and I love him."

Eleanor stared. "You're disparaging your own—— Oh, but he can't be yours—you were only just married, weren't you?—so Laura said, anyway. Then that is *not* your boy, is he?" asked Eleanor, indicating Georgie.

Susan's face lit up. "You took him for mine? Oh, I wish he were! He's Sidney's. The other one—Josie—is my step-son."

"And you've never had one of your own? You've not been married long——?"

"I've been married five months."

"I would have sworn that one—Georgie—was yours. He has a look in the eyes like you—though of course he looks more like Sidney. This is my first glimpse of him; they never have him about; Laura

is certainly the most indifferent of mothers! You'd think she'd be proud to show off such a rare child! Susan, you are so changed! You are lovelier and more blooming than ever; yet you are, somehow, so matured! As if you had lived, Susan! As if," added Eleanor, gazing thoughtfully into Susan's face, "you had lived tragically! *Have you?*"

Susan nodded dumbly.

"Tell me all about it! Begin at *Once upon a time*, and don't skip. I know it'll be thrilling!" said Eleanor, settling herself expectantly to listen; "for I always said, you remember, that you were born for romance. Tell me about your husband."

Romance and Joe! Susan almost laughed, though her heart was heavy. In what a position she was placed, when all her pride shrank from presenting her husband to her friend!—and yet loyalty to the obligations of her bond must close her lips upon explanations, excuses, apologies.

A sound in the kitchen doorway drew their eyes from each other. Joe, in his shirt sleeves, a scowl on his face, came striding across the grass to the tree.

"Here another time I come to use my car and find the gasoline is all!" he fretfully accused his wife, not heeding her visitor. "Again you was usin' it without astin' me for the dare! Ain't? A pretty thing that whenever I go to use my car the gasoline is every time all! No matter how often I fill it up yet! If I got it so filled up at twelve o'clock in the night, you'd get out of bed to make sure it was all used up till morning a'ready! Ain't, you would?"

Suddenly he became conscious of Susan's deathly pallor and of a fire in her eyes that alarmed him—and at the same time, of her companion's look of amazement and alarm.

Turning away abruptly, frowning and muttering, he disappeared again in the house.

"Well!" exclaimed Eleanor, "chauffeurs *must* be scarce out here if you stand for—— Susan Schrekengust!" Eleanor seized Susan's arm convulsively. "*Who is that man?*"

"My husband, Eleanor!"—and Susan laid her head on Eleanor's shoulder and sobbed; long, tearing sobs that seemed to come from the depths of her soul; from the pent-up griefs of years; from the anguish of defeated love, defeated motherhood, death, despair.

Later, when Clara had gone home with Georgie, Josie had gone indoors to his father, and Susan, now very quiet, still sat on the grass with her friend, Eleanor asked her wonderingly, "What the *devil* did you do such a thing for, Susan?"

"It's so good," said Susan with a sigh of pleasure, "to hear you cuss again, Eleanor! Until I met you, I had never, in my short and simple life, heard a perfect lady swear!"

"I'm afraid I never did serve up my words on a napkin. And quite early in life I decided to abandon the career of a perfect lady. A woman of brains (you'll not question I'm that?) never is a perfect lady, the absolutely real thing, you know; because, you see, it means such a well-ordered mind and soul and life as to preclude rioting of any sort, whether of the emotions or the intellect. It involves repose, conservatism, a nice moderation in all things, an absence of big enthusiasms, large vision, vigour of thought and feeling——

"You've simply got to explain to me, Susan, how you came to marry that man! Is he a diamond in the rough? Is *he* Sidney Houghton's brother? Is he a real Houghton at *all*?" she demanded, incredulously. "Why, the Houghtons have always been awfully snippy about their family blood! Their sense of their own superiority has been as sublime as it was in-

explicable. Don't expect me to spare your feelings! I don't intend to! You deserve 'most anything for throwing yourself away like this! I could beat you for it!"

"I deserve your scorn; I don't deserve your friendship!"

"You deserve to be shut up in a lunatic asylum! Why did you do it? Speak up!"

"It's a very sordid story, Eleanor. No romance about it that I can see! (You said I was born for romance!) I was engaged to Sidney Houghton. He jilted me. I was broken-hearted at first; then reckless and despairing. My father became involved in money troubles and died suddenly. We would have had to leave our home, which I thought would kill Mother. So to save her I married Joe Houghton. Joe gave Mother and my sisters their old home. Then, a month later, Mother died. My sacrifice was for nothing! That's all."

"You were a dreadful little fool, of course! You know that, don't you?"

"I don't find the knowledge consoling, dear, so please don't draw my attention to it."

"But you can't go on living out your life with that man, Susan! You'll have to leave him!"

"Wouldn't it be going back on a bargain? He practically bought me."

"And you've surely paid him back already a thousand per cent!"

"It wasn't in the bond that I'd be his wife for a few months."

"You actually consider yourself bound to him, to a creature like that, *you?*"

"I don't know."

"If you do think you're bound, if you're that fanatical, then make him let you live your own life. Demand your rights!"

"Make him? Compared to Joe Houghton's obstinacy Gibraltar is wobbly!"

"If he's in love with you, there's nothing you can't make him do for you."

"By playing up my sex? How would I be above the woman of the streets if I did that? The world thinks it all right, I suppose, for a *wife* to gain her ends that way."

"Oh, the world!" shrugged Eleanor. "Of course its standards are never right. Show me something that the majority believe and I'll show you something that's a lie! The persecuted of any age nearly always turn out to have been the prophets of that age."

"Carrie Nation!" smiled Susan. "And now we've got national Prohibition! Who'd ever have thought it!"

"Talking about morals," Eleanor went on, "people haven't any, really. They have Respectability, Conformity, Propriety. Those are society's only values."

"Yes, I often think," said Susan, "if that hypocrite's cloak, Respectability, could be stripped from our shrinking souls, what a sight we'd all be!"

"You remind me of a letter Robert saw ages ago, when he was a college student, written by Howells to Mark Twain; Mark Twain showed it to Robert. It was about the autobiography Mark Twain was writing. Howells wrote, 'You always rather bewildered me by your veracity, and I fancy you may tell the truth about yourself. But all of it? The black truth which we all know of ourselves in our hearts—even *you* won't tell the black heart's truth.'"

"What a human document it would be if any man or woman had the courage to do it!" said Susan. "Of course Rousseau came near it."

"Susan! You've got to *leave* that man that you've so absurdly gone and married!"

"I have hurt so many people; I shrink from hurting any more!"

"What do you mean? Whom have you hurt?"

"My father and mother and sisters! And if I left Joe, I would hurt not only him; my two sisters would break their hearts. They *believe* in the marriage ceremony, you know—as a sort of fetish—'For better, for worse'—'Until death'—'Whom God hath joined'—'These two are no more twain, but one flesh.' My sisters would for the rest of their days walk among their neighbours disgraced and stricken."

"Would that be as tragic, as wasteful, as your spending your whole life with such an outrageous creature? You've got to leave him! And you will leave him!"

She rose and Susan stood up at her side.

"When you've made up your mind, Susan, come to me in Middleburg. Promise!"

"I'll—I'll have to think it over," Susan faltered.

But there was hope in her voice and in her shining eyes.

CHAPTER X

AN INTERLUDE

BUT she did not leave her husband. Josie came down with whooping-cough and of course she could not desert a sick child. She nursed him devotedly for six weeks and became so run down through overwork and loss of sleep that she fell an easy victim to the typhoid fever germs which were discovered by the doctor to poison the boasted well water of White Oak Farm.

So far into the Valley of the Shadow did Susan drift in this illness that she would surely never have come back but for Joe's amazing devotion and ceaseless care. And of this she, of course, knew nothing during many weeks of delirium and unconsciousness.

It was over the period of her long, tedious convalescence that she slowly became aware of the unwonted comfort that enveloped her: the uniformed trained nurse, the champagne they fed to her by teaspoonfuls, the pretty down quilt on her bed, the new kimono that lay across the foot of the bed; and every sort of convenient device for a sick room that had ever been heard of seemed to have been provided for her. Where did it all come from? Surely not from Joe who was always watching every penny she spent——

But stranger than this lavish expenditure was Joe's manifest anxiety, tenderness, grief!

She felt that he must be neglecting his work, so

often was he in and out of her room, so many hours sitting patiently beside her bed.

Was he, then, really capable of a great passion?—of fine feeling, of unselfish love?

As she grew stronger she found herself wildly regretting first, that she had not died, and next, that Joe was being so good, so wonderful, to her.

“For how can I ever leave him after this?” she would mourn as she lay through the long days and nights while life came slowly back to her. If only he would neglect her instead of binding her with these heavy chains of kindness which she feared she could never, never break!

“I’ve never in my life been able to be ruthless! He seems to care for me so much!”

The trained nurse admitted, one day, that in all her varied experiences, she had “never seen a husband so dippy about his wife!”

“Those two days and nights that we thought you might not pull through,” the nurse told her, “that man was the most pitiable object I ever saw. I wouldn’t want to see my worst enemy go through what he suffered, Mrs. Houghton! Your husband may not have your education or be as *refined* as what you are, Missus, but he certainly loves you, all right! Well, I just guess!

“They say round here,” she continued, “that Mister’s a tight-wad, and he sure is! But not where *you’re* concerned, Missus! Not when you’re sick, anyhow! Nothing was too good, nothing too expensive, that I asked him to get you.”

Susan wondered why it was. Remorse flooded her heart, as she thought of her so different feelings toward him.

“If he had been ill, I’d have hoped he’d die!” she mercilessly made herself admit to her own conscience. “He is worse than nothing to me! A

millstone about my neck when I want to be free!"

As soon as she was well enough to be moved Joe sent her and Josie and the nurse to Atlantic City.

And there, one day, on the sands, Eleanor Arnold unexpectedly came upon her.

"Of course I came here just to be with you," Eleanor explained as she sat at Susan's feet in the windy sunshine. "The day after I got your card telling me you were coming here I packed and started. I couldn't miss such a chance of seeing you alone!"

"And you will stay as long as I am here?"

"Yes, if it means the rest of my mortal life!"

To Susan, too weak, for the time being, to battle with problems, the days that followed were times of wonderful peace and content; a respite of real happiness. Congenial and loved companionship, rest from the household drudgery which she detested, no anxieties about expenses, the absence of Joe's society, the sea, the fine air——

To be sure, there were shadows. Eleanor would not give up insisting that she must leave Joe; whereas Susan's new sense of obligation to him was so great that she felt disloyal in even speaking of it.

"When your husband greatly loves you," she would argue with Eleanor, "you surely owe him something."

"But unless you love him, Susan, you don't belong to him; no matter how much he loves you; no matter what he has done for you. You belong to yourself—simply because you don't and can't love him."

Susan was silent.

"You know I'm right!" insisted Eleanor.

"It would mean such a bitter struggle—leaving him—and I'm so tired of fighting with life!"

"You're supine! With that child of his, for instance——"

Josie had a fretful way of nagging at his "mother" which Eleanor, though sympathetically understanding children, thought very exasperating. "You let him tyrannize over you, my dear."

"His father makes it so hard for me to manage him!" Susan defended her feeble disciplining of Josie.

Josie chose just this moment of their discussion to leave the nurse and come running to Susan to renew his momentarily diverted insistence that she dig something in the sand for him, though the nurse was doing it much better than his enfeebled mother could, and though Susan had explained to him, after having yielded several times to his demands and overtaxed her endurance, that she could do no more. The nurse had succeeded in distracting his attention for a moment; but he was back again now, tugging at his mother and peevishly reiterating that she and no other must dig for him.

When she firmly refused and told him to go to the nurse, he flew into a tantrum, screamed rebelliously, and tore at her clothes.

"There, now!" Susan challenged Eleanor, "O Socrates, what would you do *now*? Tell me!"

Eleanor looked rather dashed. "You might jump on his stomach," she suggested.

Josie's howls ceased abruptly, and eyeing his mother's friend with a mixture of resentment and apprehension, he retreated precipitately.

"I wouldn't stand that nagging, whining habit he has, Susie," Eleanor declared, when Josie, deciding that safety first lay in a discreet distance from so fierce a lady, went back to the nurse.

"I really do try, Eleanor, for his own sake as much as mine, to train him up in the way he should go. But I'm handicapped."

"It's rotten! The whole situation!"

"It has its compensations. Josie can be very lovable. And he is fond of me."

"You're too easily compensated! I wish you had my conceit; you'd hold yourself at your true worth!"

"You don't begin to realize all my difficulties. It isn't nearly so easy, I find, to get rid of a husband as to acquire one. To a divorced woman so many means of self-support are closed. School teaching, for instance. I suppose I might stand in a store——"

"Stand?" I've heard of floor *walkers*!" said Eleanor, tentatively.

"Perhaps it is a Pennsylvania Dutch-ism. I didn't know it was. I mean clerk in a store."

"See who's coming!" exclaimed Eleanor, abruptly.

Susan looked up and saw, strolling toward them down the beach, alone, a young lady with a marked air of distinction both in dress and bearing.

"Your sister-in-law, my dear!" Eleanor announced.

"It is! Rather awkward, as we've never been introduced!"

"Not *yet*!" asked Eleanor, incredulously.

"What could you reasonably expect—you've seen Joe?" was the answer which rose to Susan's lips, but which she did not speak. "Of course she has no idea how nice I am," was what she said.

"Does she know you are here?"

"I didn't know *she* was here. I don't know what she knows about me."

"Let me have the fun of introducing you to her!"

"Help yourself—if it will amuse you."

"It will amuse me very much!"

Eleanor rose as Laura Houghton drew near, and went forward with outstretched hand.

Laura's face, which had been dreary and fretful, lit up at sight of her friend and she greeted her

eagerly. "I'm so glad to see you! I'm here all alone; Sidney's been called home on business, and there's not a soul here I know or *would* know! You're a godsend to me, Eleanor! You've simply got to stay here with me until Sidney gets back."

"How long will that be?"

"A few days. We splurged so recklessly in New York this winter that we've had to draw in and come here to recover. Sidney has a most interesting little habit of running ahead of his income and then retiring into strict privacy to catch up. It lends great variety to our life!" Laura shrugged, a look of bitterness in her face. "Fortunately he has an accommodating half-brother who never spends any money himself, so always has plenty to loan to Sidney. Are you staying with friends?" she asked with a questioning glance toward Susan reclining among her cushions a few yards away.

"Yes, with an old school friend who is here with her nurse, convalescing from typhoid. Let me introduce you. My dear," said Eleanor as she led Laura to Susan, "let me present Mrs. Sidney Houghton. Mrs. Joseph——" Eleanor coughed over Susan's name and Laura did not catch it. She bent to offer her hand to the pale, frail-looking girl on the sand; and Susan took the hand gravely.

"You've been very ill?" said Laura, sympathetically, thinking how beautiful the invalid was. She certainly looked as though she might be a Somebody! It flashed upon her that there was something familiar in this high-bred, interesting face.

"Very ill," answered Susan.

"Is the sea air helping you?"

"Very much, I think."

"You and Miss Arnold are stopping at the same hotel?"

"Yes. At the D—— House."

Laura looked surprised. It was not the sort of place she would have expected Eleanor or any friend of hers to patronize.

Joe had chosen it, and while he would spare no expense necessary for his wife's recovery, he drew the line at paying for fashion.

"You are comfortable there?" asked Laura, doubtfully.

"Comfortable, but not luxurious," answered Eleanor. "It's plain living and high thinking with Susan and me just now."

Laura glanced again at the convalescent. "I beg pardon, I didn't catch your friend's name, Eleanor."

"Mrs. Joseph Houghton," repeated Eleanor.

Laura looked dazed, almost bewildered, then utterly astonished. But only for an instant. Almost immediately she had gotten herself in hand.

"Sidney's sister-in-law?" she repeated with perfect composure. "He will be sorry to hear you have been so ill," she said, graciously.

She turned back to Eleanor. "I am at Hotel T——. Will you come to see me?"

"Of course. I have my evenings off; Susan goes to bed right after dinner. Shall I come this evening?"

"Yes, do please, Eleanor."

"I'll be there about half-past eight."

"Very well. Good-by." She nodded, a shade ceremoniously, to Susan, and moved on.

Eleanor literally flopped down at Susan's side. "I'm limp!" she feebly cried. "And you—you never looked more cool and collected! Why aren't you excited or amused or something?"

"I leave that to you."

"It's none of my affair! I suppose Laura's furi-

ous with me for dragging her into such an awkward position!"

"It ought not to be so awfully awkward. She simply won't let herself be saddled with her husband's uninteresting relatives. Of course I'm far from uninteresting, but she's never had any reason to suspect it."

"You're inhumanely just to her. You know very well that in her place you would have been kind to Joe's wife."

"I'd hate to have her be 'kind' to me in the way you mean, Eleanor!"

"You'd have been genuinely nice; not standoffish."

"When you think of the sort of person she naturally thought Joe would have married, I suppose she considered her only safety lay in not knowing me at all."

"Damned rot!"

"I'm afraid you're not a perfect lady."

"I told you I'd abandoned that futile function! And I'm glad I did! I'd like to be a roaring savage!"

"Do savages roar? Dear me, what for?"

"The great disadvantage of being well-bred is that you can't let off steam! You've no safety-valve and so become congested, spiritually poisoned! Oh, I tell you," said Eleanor, darkly, "civilization's got a lot to answer for!"

"It *has* got us into a tangled mess, hasn't it?" said Susan with a long breath.

Eleanor parted from Susan that day with an unsolicited promise that she would faithfully report, next morning, any particularly interesting phases of the conversation she would have that evening with Mrs. Sidney Houghton.

She was, however, greatly disappointed. During the three hours that she spent with Laura in her

suite of rooms at her hotel not the slightest reference was made to the episode of the morning. For Laura was a young woman capable of exercising, on occasion, rather Spartan self-restraint; and Eleanor, though not shy or retiring, and though dying to know what her friend was thinking about her unexpectedly charming sister-in-law, had, also, her reticences.

Just a day or two after the encounter of Laura and Susan the latter received a letter from Joe in which he told her, in very bad English and worse spelling, that Sidney had again borrowed money from him.

"I give him five years to get threw with all he's got," Joe wrote. "He says his Missus is at Atlantic City just now. When I told him you was there, too, he looked awful funny. I guess he was some surprised Ide spend for such as that. And, to be sure, I wouldn't, neither, but for to get you well and strong again. If you meet up with that sour-faced high-stepper he married, just you give her as good as she sends, Susan, for some day *you* will be living in the big house and her and Sid will be glad to have so much as the tenant's cottage to live in. You mind if I ain't right."

Susan reflected that it was well for Georgie that White Oak Farm was entailed to him, or Joe would certainly get possession of it.

But in view of this entailment, she could not imagine how Joe expected to contrive ever to occupy the big house.

However, she wasted no thought on the subject, for it did not greatly interest her.

She was subjected to a good deal of embarrassment during her stay at the seaside from the fact that Joe, though standing ready to pay all her necessary bills, would not supply her with money. Ever since her marriage he had seemed afraid to

entrust her with a dollar, partly because of his constitutional stinginess and partly because of his constant fear lest she give help to her struggling sisters.

Several times the acuteness of her present embarrassment while at the seaside forced her to the humiliation of borrowing money from her nurse for some mere trifle like postage stamps, or feeing a servant.

"Add it to the bill you present to Mr. Houghton," she would tell the nurse, "and charge one hundred per cent. interest."

She was duly informed by Eleanor of Sidney having rejoined his wife at the T——.

"Do they have Georgie with them?" she inquired with a wistfulness in her heart that made her wonder at herself.

"Yes, but he seems to be left entirely to his nurse. Laura never goes near him apparently! She is the very coldest mother I've ever seen. She actually told me she wished she *could* care more for Georgie, but that somehow she just couldn't work up any motherliness! It simply isn't in her. I tell her I consider it a frightful waste for such a woman to have a child, while one like me sits about eating her heart out with longing for one. I'd almost be willing to settle down to take care of a husband for the sake of having a child!"

"You'd go so far as that, dear?"

"I said I'd 'almost'. Do you suppose, Susan, that Laura is jealous of Sidney's former attachment to you (you say he jilted you) and that that's why she doesn't make up to you?"

"She doesn't know that I am the woman Sidney jilted."

Eleanor considered this reply for a moment without speaking. "She knows he jilted someone, but does not know that you are the one?"

Susan nodded.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Sidney told me."

Eleanor regarded her thoughtfully. "How extraordinary!" she remarked.

"It is, rather; isn't it!"

"Sidney can be very charming; but he is not and never was worthy of you, my dear!"

"It was because he thought *me* unworthy that he jilted me!"

"Wanted money and family, of course?"

"Yes."

"Well, he got it. But he doesn't look overwhelmingly happy over it!"

"I've noticed that he doesn't."

"Did he behave abominably toward you, Susan?"

"Very much so!"

"He'd be capable of that, I'm sure!" said Eleanor with emphasis.

When at the end of three weeks Susan reluctantly wrote to Joe that she was now quite strong enough to go home he telegraphed at once that on the following Sunday he would come for them all and "fetch" them.

Susan, after considering the situation, decided to spare herself, if possible, the painful ordeal of having Eleanor again encounter her husband. She would take means to prevent it.

She wrote to Joe that they would not wait until the end of the week to leave for home, but would start the very day he received her letter and would be with him on Wednesday evening.

CHAPTER XI

HOME AGAIN

IN THE first months of her marriage Susan had not felt that Joe's dwelling-place was her home; she was neither its creator nor its mistress; only its housekeeper. The only concern she had felt for it, therefore, was that she should discharge the obligation she was under to make her husband comfortable.

But the renewal of her relations with Eleanor had awakened in her a bit of ambition to try to make the house in which she lived and the appointments of her daily life a little attractive. After those weeks at the seaside she came home resolved to experiment with her situation and see whether she could make it really liveable. Unless she could change a good many things, both material and spiritual, in her existence, she saw that if she would save her soul alive, she must leave her husband.

She realized that there was probably no limit to the power she could wield over Joe to get what she wanted, if she followed that suggestion Eleanor had once made to her, that she play upon his passion for her. Eleanor, of course, had not really understood what she was saying.

"Even if I loved a man, I couldn't do that!" thought Susan. "That sort of thing may be feminine, but it certainly is not womanly—and it seems to me that it's up to a woman to *be* a woman, not just a female!"

Her first experiment was to let Joe understand,

when, a few weeks after her return, he suggested that she was now quite strong enough to dismiss the washwoman, that she did not intend to dismiss her.

"I shall never again, while I live, stand at the washtub. I prefer school teaching," she told him.

"But you can't school teach now you're married oncet!"

"Oh, yes, I can. If you won't pay for a washwoman, I can easily earn more than enough to pay for one by substituting in the Middleburg schools. And as I prefer that work to washing, that is what I shall do."

"You talk dumb, Susan!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "Fur a married lady to be talkin' about workin' out yet! Don't be so ignorant dumb!"

But though he never again insisted upon dismissing the laundress, he never failed on wash day to draw Susan's attention to what they would be saving if she did the work herself.

"A dollar and a half every week, if you wasn't so high-minded! Yi, yi, think what that there dollar and a half would buy yet!"

Susan's proposals for re-papering and re-furnishing the cottage Joe met with the assurance that it would be a useless expenditure because in a few years they would be living in the big house.

"But White Oak Farm is entailed," she reminded him (as though he ever for a moment forget it!). "Your brother can't mortgage or sell it."

"Sid is runnin' through with his money as fast as he otherwise can; he's beginnin' a'ready to draw heavy on his principal. It won't go long till his money's all. Then when he ain't got none no more fur to keep this here place a-goin', he'll have to rent it. He'll rent it to *me*. See?"

"I wish you'd move away from here altogether."

"Well, I won't!"

"You want me to live in this cottage for five years just as it is?"

"What's five years?—when you'll be livin' in the big house for the rest of your life!"

"Only until Georgie takes it over."

"But he won't have no money, neither, to run the place. Till Georgie inherits it a'ready, Sid will have spent the last dollar *he's* got! So Georgie, too, will have to rent it out."

No arguments could budge him from his refusal to "spend any" on the cottage.

"I have some very nice friends, Joe, that I knew at school; I'd like to ask them out to see me sometimes. I could make this cottage very attractive if you would let me spend about a thousand dollars on it."

"A thousand dollars yet! On somepin that till five years from now you won't have no use fur! Och, Susan, just as if I would! Why, I wouldn't near do somepin like that!"

"Am I to wait five years before I can ask any of my friends to visit me? For I can't ask them here while things are as they are now."

"Me I don't favour comp'ny, anyhow. I like better to be by ourselves."

"But I do like company; some kinds."

"Comp'ny costs too expensive. And it takes a woman's mind off her housework, comp'ny does. And if you have comp'ny, next thing you'll want to go runnin' yourself and neglect me and Josie. No'p!" he shook his head. "I see how it's a good thing our cottage *ain't* so fancy like you want fur it to be! Yes, anyhow!"

Susan considered several possible schemes for forcing Joe's hand in this matter. "I might just buy a lot of furniture and charge it up to him——"

But she knew perfectly well that he would simply send it back to the shops.

She might go to Middleburg, get a position of some sort, and refuse to come home until he consented to let her have the kind of home she wanted and had a right to. But there was Josie—she could not walk out of the house and desert a four-year-old child.

As time moved on and she took no stand, but just let things slide, she felt that Eleanor had been quite right, entirely justified, in calling her "spineless". There had been a time in her life when she would have braced up and wrestled with any conditions that she greatly wished to change. But the intensity of her suffering through Sidney had apparently left her without power to fight her way further through life. Was she, then, doomed to merely exist, not live, all the rest of her days?

Occasionally, when she did take issue with Joe, on some point that seemed to her too vital to admit of indecision on her part, the ordeal would leave her so limp that she would greatly doubt whether the gain was worth the cost.

Joe had a way of holding her punctiliously to those of her domestic tasks which involved his comforts, but it seemed that she had to be dangerously ill before he felt an equal obligation toward *her*. Let him come into the kitchen and find a meal not ready on the minute and he would grumble and sulk for the rest of the day; yet he was himself extremely unpunctual and irregular and perfectly heedless of the inconvenience he caused Susan by keeping her waiting (often for a mere whim) an hour or more beyond the hour for dinner or supper.

"But that's what a woman's work *is*, to run her house for her Mister's convenience," he would excuse himself when she would protest against such inconsiderateness.

"I never know when to expect you, Joe, and it keeps me forever in this dreadful kitchen."

"That's your place, ain't it? Where else had you ought to want to be?"

"If it were necessary for you to be late all the time, I'd bear it. But you're simply indifferent to my convenience."

"I do what it suits me to do. I come in to eat when I feel fur comin'. It's your business to have me a hot meal when I want it."

"Shall I change the dinner hour to one o'clock, since you so often come in long after twelve?"

"No! Fur when I do come in at twelve, then I want to eat at twelve! So you see to it that you are got it ready at twelve, still."

"Listen, Joe; I loathe a kitchen. When I am in it my one desire is to escape from it. You deliberately, for no reason at all, make me waste hours here that I might be spending on things I like to do."

"Waste hours!" You are got no need to waste hours! You could find a-plenty to do in your kitchen, whiles you're waitin' round fur me to come in, if you *wanted* to find it. You don't keep your closets very good redd up, I took notice a'ready."

Susan suddenly decided that here was one of the places where it would pay to take a stand. "Even *my* spine stiffens when it's a question of useless kitchen work!" she thought.

"I'll not put up with it any longer, Joe," she informed him.

Joe stared. "What fur kind of lang'age is that fur a wife to use to her Mister?—'won't put up with it!' Yi, yi, Susan!"

"Don't forget," repeated Susan. "I won't put up with it."

Joe's domestic standards being those of the only home life he had ever really known, that of the Pennsylvania Dutch farm where he had lived for so many years of his young manhood, Susan's "putting

her foot down" was, in his estimation, such a usurpation of the male's exclusive prerogative that it gave him a genuine shock.

"To think I got married to a wife that would sass me like that!" he exclaimed.

Susan said no more, but as Joe furtively watched her across the dinner table, he saw no softening signs in her face, of shame for her unwifely talk.

For the rest of the day he revelled in a perfect orgy of sulking; and the next morning he put Susan's *dictum* to the test by deliberately coming in to dinner at one o'clock instead of the prescribed hour of noon.

He found the kitchen empty, the table cleared, and no sign of a meal on the stove.

When he searched the house, he discovered that Susan was not even at home. Anything more outrageously high-handed!—

"I got to learn her better'n this!" he reflected, darkly.

But how?

"I'm stumped!" he heavily admitted.

He cooked himself a lunch of eggs and coffee, purposely and quite unnecessarily cluttering up the kitchen and leaving it in a fearful state of disorder.

His supper hour was half-past five, but to further "try out" the lengths to which his lawful wife would carry her rebellion, he avoided appearing until nearly seven.

Again he found emptiness and no supper; and a search of the premises discovered the car to have been taken from the garage. The kitchen had been "redd up," so of course she had been back during the afternoon.

Such reckless indifference to the needs and comforts of her husband! Such neglect of her house to "go runnin'"! Such a shameless flouting of his

disapproval! What could a mere man do in the face of such "crazy behaviours"?

When at half-past eight that evening she returned home with Josie, Joe had not yet been able to reach any decision as to how he would deal with her.

In his bewilderment and confusion, he actually appealed to her to help him.

"What *kin* I do with you when you ac' up like this here?"

"That's easy, Joe—come to your meals on time."

"I'll come when it suits me!"

"Then you take your chances of having to cook your own meals."

"I ain't standin' fur no sich behaviours, Susan!"

"There are a few things that I am not standing for, Joe," she answered, walking out of the room.

While Joe had never been more dumbfounded or more furiously resentful in his life, it surprised and puzzled him to find that his anger against Susan only augmented his passion for her.

"She surely has *got* me, the little feist!" he growled to himself.

For a week he was so painfully punctual and so heavily sarcastic if she were not entirely ready to serve him the instant he arrived, that she soon learned to be fully prepared for him at least five minutes before she could reasonably look for him.

One morning he accosted her ceremoniously, almost melodramatically. "With your permission, Missus, I'll mebbby be late three minutes or so, this dinner, seein' I got to go to Middleburg over."

"I appreciate your consideration in telling me beforehand, Joe. Thank you!" she said with such humble sincerity that he found himself glowing with pleasure, as though she had praised him for a deed of valour and chivalry.

Having succeeded in making him punctual, her

next stand was to insist on certain table decencies and even niceties which Joe professed to hold in great contempt. Among the many phases of his jealousy with regard to her, none was more evident than his jealousy of her personal superiority to himself. He resented any least thing that seemed to take her out of his reach or off of his level, and he hated every manifestation of her better education, her wider experiences, her finer tastes. The very intensity of his scorn for the table reforms she introduced was proof to her that he felt them to be a criticism of himself and a setting up of herself above and apart from him.

But one day she discovered, to her surprise, that he was really inordinately proud of this very superiority which he so jealously resented. A cattle dealer, with whom he had to transact some business, came over from Fokendauqua to take dinner with them, and Susan decided that as the man was Joe's guest and not hers, she would, to-day, dispense with the table formalities and daintinesses which he so hated.

"I'll serve the dinner as *he* likes it served."

What, then, was her surprise to find him hurt, angry, and disappointed at being foiled of an anticipated pride in displaying to his crude visitor what a "high-toned" wife he had!

"Yes, fur yourself and *your* friends you'd take trouble!" he reproached her. "But fur mine, not! Any old thing when *my* folks comes; ain't?"

"But I thought you hated napkins and finger bowls and extra forks for pie and all that! Every day for three weeks you've been telling me you did. I served the dinner to-day as I thought you liked it."

"Yes, you did!" he sneered, skeptically. "You done it to spite me!"

She wondered wearily whether he really believed that.

"If you *got* to put on all that there damned style," began Joe—but Susan checked him with an indignant glance toward Josie.

"You'll teach him to swear!" she warned.

"Nevvy mind, Muvver, me knowed dat word before," Josie said, reassuringly.

"If you're got to put on style," Joe repeated, firmly, "you ain't got no need to *contrary* it all just as soon as strangers comes to eat along! A awful funny way, I must say—keepin' your fancy manners fur private and your plain ways fur when comp'ny is here!"

Susan's occasional glimpses of Sidney's wife made her wonder whether Laura, with her seemingly more fortunate lot, was really any happier than was she herself.

"She looks so awfully discontented, so soured on life!"

Was it because she depended so entirely upon outside things to give her happiness?—and had no resources at all within herself?—not even the love of a child?

One autumn afternoon Susan had the unusual experience of meeting Sidney's wife face to face in the narrow lane which afforded a short cut from White Oak Farm to the trolley line to Middleburg. Both the little roadster of the cottage and the touring-car of the big house being out of commission, Susan had just returned from town by the trolley as Laura was walking to the trolley station. The lane was so very narrow that Laura was obliged to stop and step aside to let Susan pass. Susan sensed at once that her sister-in-law was going to be gracious, condescending. Now nothing which Sidney's wife could do could so much as even prick the surface of Susan's life, let alone touch the deep places where she had suffered so much. So it was with a quite detached and very faint curiosity that she contemplated

Laura's bearing toward her in this moment of their unavoidable meeting. And before this impersonal regard and slightly ceremonious bow of Susan Laura's intended condescension and graciousness suddenly collapsed, leaving her actually confused, almost abashed.

As Susan walked on home, the words "aristocracy of the spirit" moved like a refrain in her brain, as she thought of how she, born of lowly peasants, had, by virtue of her obviously stronger, more intrepid spirit, abashed and confused her comparatively high-born sister-in-law.

She recalled a sentence in "The Water Babies": "A man may learn from his Bible to be a more thorough gentleman than if he were brought up in all the drawing-rooms of London."

"After all," thought Susan, "it's only genuine religion that can make one *truly* aristocratic."

CHAPTER XII

A FEW MORE YEARS AT THE COTTAGE

AS THE days, weeks, and months slipped by Susan came more and more to let circumstances get the better of her; her husband's will and personality dominate their joint life; her own individuality sink and be submerged in a groove of narrow household drudgery, with almost no life outside the four walls of their cottage except that which she got from her lively correspondence with Eleanor—all idea of any closer contact under present conditions seeming impracticable; from her flying about the country in her husband's car (a wonderful safety valve); from her relation with her sisters and a few of her Pennsylvania Dutch neighbours; but most of all from books, through which she "roamed at large o'er all this scene of man." It was her avid love of books and her growing devotion to Josie during the next four years that kept her soul alive in an otherwise deep and heavy loneliness and isolation.

It seemed to her sometimes, as she would move mechanically through the household tasks which never had and never would seem worth doing, but which she nevertheless faithfully performed, that life for most people was nothing more than going through a succession of senseless movements which led nowhere.

"We lie down and rise again; wash dishes and put them away; take them out again and put them away

again; get into bed and out of it and into it again; dress and undress and dress again; a succession of motions! What for? What is the Universe doing with us? Are we fools, not to cut loose and do what we want to do?"

But what did we want to do? The eternal question!

"It ain't respectable, the way you won't go to church," Joe sometimes grumbled. "I want Josie brang up respectable. You had ought to take him to Sabbath school still."

"But I do go sometimes with Georgie along, Father," said Josie. "The last time I went with him along, I ast the teacher was the Holy Ghost a spook, or whatever? And she says no, but you couldn't see it, you could only per-theeve it. So I guess," added Josie, thoughtfully, "it's somepin like a skunk."

"Now will you listen to that!" cried Joe with an accusing eye upon Susan. "That my son should by growin' up that ignorant as to think that the Holy Ghost is like a skunk yet!—just because you won't take him to Sunday school to get learnt right!"

"I suppose you went to Sunday school when you were a little boy, Joe?" asked Susan.

"Sure, I did. Sometimes I went pretty often, too."

"Then you can tell Josie what the Holy Ghost is. I don't know myself."

"Well, with all the education *you're* got, you anyhow know it ain't like a skunk!"

"Why do you think I ought to go to church when *you* never go?"

"Women had ought to be more religious than men. It comes natural to 'em. You had ought to go to church to set a good example to Josie. To be sure, I know a preacher believes an awful lot that *ain't*.

But still, religion is *religion*. A body's got to have religion."

"Look at Mother!" cried Josie, "trying not to leave you see her near bustin' to laugh!"

Susan let it come then, the little shriek of laughter which her effort to suppress had turned her crimson.

Joe looked offended. "Ain't you got no reverence for *nothing*, Susan?" he demanded, disapprovingly.

"Well, yes," Susan admitted. "For babies."

"Och, Susan," Joe said, impatiently, "sometimes you talk so dumb!"

A growing source of anxiety and distress to Susan was her sisters' increasing poverty with their advancing age. To eke out a living they boarded the school teacher in the winter and took a few summer boarders during the vacation; but the extra work which this entailed, in addition to the heavy labour involved in getting a living out of their bit of land, was quite too much for them.

There was just one respect in which Susan, after seven years of married life, knew her husband to be invulnerable to any attack or strategy which she might employ to move or change him, and that was his penuriousness. She did not waste herself upon useless attempts to make him generous. She submitted to the limited expenditure which he allowed her in spite of the fact that she knew he must every year be adding enormously to his inheritance from his uncle, the interest of which he never spent.

But her mind was constantly active in devising ways and means of helping Addie and Lizzie without his knowledge; a most difficult feat.

"I'm growing actually cunning!" she would bitterly tell herself while carefully calculating how much sugar and coffee she might slip to the little household in Reifsville without Joe's missing it; or how many extra cookies she might venture to bake to

carry to her sisters without Joe's noticing how fast the flour "got all".

Josie early proved to be a stumbling-block in the way of her giving her sisters aid. He was so constantly her companion that it became increasingly difficult to elude his seeing how she circumvented his father's meanness. It was not so much because of her fear of Joe as of setting an apparently bad example to the growing boy, that she tried to escape his unchildlike vigilance of her.

Sometimes she suspected that Joe actually set his son to watch and spy upon her. It depressed and discouraged her even more than it angered her when, after a visit to his "aunties", Josie, a great boy of nine years, would run to his father and, deliberately and with the keenest relish, "tattle" to him that Mother had given "aunties" a package of tea and a half-dozen oranges.

A device for securing a few dollars to give to her sisters occurred to her one day as she was driving with Josie to Middleburg to buy a quantity of groceries: if she should make her purchases at one of the chain of cut-rate stores, of whose existence Joe had not yet learned, she might save a bit from the sum he had entrusted to her (after he had made a most careful and accurate calculation as to what the groceries would cost) and the bit thus saved could be safely passed over to Lizzie and Addie.

When on the way home they stopped at the Schrekengusts' cottage at Reifsville, Susan realized, to her intense disgust, that Josie was watching her like a detective to see whether any of their load of groceries was to be given to his aunts. He kept at her heels every minute, following her about wherever she stepped. She had to watch for a chance, when Lizzie was giving him an apple, to slip the dollar she had saved from her shopping into Addie's pocket.

"Och, Susie, saddy*," Addie gratefully whispered. But as Josie, on the alert, turned back to them, Susan lifted her eyebrows to impose silence.

"How nice and fresh this room looks," she said, hastily, stepping to the threshold of the downstairs bedroom which was rented to the village teacher.

"Yes, ain't! Teacher she put them white curtains up," explained Lizzie. "And when Hiram Slosser seen 'em, he come over and ast us, he says, '*Don't* you think them curtains is comin' a little near to bein' fash'nable fur a Old Mennonite?' he says. 'But, Brother Hiram,' I says, 'look at what Missus over at your place put up at her windahs!' I says. 'I'm an Old and she's a New, but I ain't got no sich fixins as hern. Nor I wouldn't, neither,' I says. 'Well,' he says, 'I tol' Missus when she fetched them curtains of hern from the store that I had my doubts. But she claims there's nothin' to 'em but what belongs to neatness.' And I tol' him, 'Hiram,' I says, 'your Missus is listenin' to the temptin's of the Enemy.' Then I tol' him that me and Addie us we can't help fur what our lady boarder puts in her own room. Nor we can't, neither, can we, Susie?" she appealed, highly injured.

"Of course you can't," responded Susan, sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, Susie, the new teacher ain't here to make your acquaintance," Lizzie continued. "She's so high educated that way that I know us we seem awful dumb to her, me and Addie. So I wisht she'd meet up with you oncet, so's she'd see there's anyhow *one* in the fambly that ain't so dumb! Yes, she's even higher educated than what you are yet, Susie! Just to think! It gives me and Addie such a shamed face to have her 'round, us bein' so dumb that way."

Lizzie and Addie were both looking worried, al-

*Thank you.

most distressed, and Susan saw with a pang that this innovation of a boarder was a very considerable strain added to their already burdened lives, especially as the boarder was, it seemed, a person who gave herself airs of superiority that humiliated them.

"Damn her!" thought Susan, resentfully.

"She's learnin' the school children such ettik-wetty—manners and rules of good society, she says," Lizzie went on. "When I tol' her how educated you was, too, she sayed she'd like so well to have an interduction to you and she keeps astin' us why you don't come and if you're too high-minded to wisit us. It is a good whiles since you was to see us, oncet, Susie; ain't you been good?"

"Oh, yes, I've been well, thank you, Lizzie; I have such a lot of work to do, it seems to me I'm always grubbing!"

"Me and Lizzie is all the time talking over you to the teacher," said Addie.

"Och, here she comes now!" exclaimed Lizzie.

A decoratively appparelled young woman of uncertain age, with a simpering manner, who seemed to ooze sentimentality from every pore, came into the "front room" where they were gathered; and Susan realized, when introductions followed, that the school mistress was evidently applying her "Manners and Rules of Good Society" to the present occasion, so studied was her bow, so prim her smile, so carefully enunciated her speech.

"Your sisters tell me that you, too, are litter-airy, Mrs. Houghton."

"Oh, no, I make no such ambitious claim, Miss Miller."

"I understood," said Miss Miller, sadly, "that you were a friend to litter-at-yure. Are you not?"

"I'm not its enemy."

"I'm so glad!" exclaimed Miss Miller, delightedly.

"Do you like Shakspeare?" she abruptly inquired, making Susan feel as though she had been jerked by a rein.

"It's hardly respectable not to like Shakspeare, is it? If I didn't, I'd not have the courage to admit it."

"There's some that don't like his works, though. And Harold Bell Wright's works, do you admar them?"

Susan noted how anxious Lizzie and Addie looked lest she fail to hold up her end with this superior person; so she answered regretfully, "I'm not familiar with the 'works' of Harold Bell Wright."

"Oh, ain't you? His books are so well liked, far and wide. Then I guess you don't read wery much, do you?"

"Probably not much that you read, Miss Miller."

"You would find Harold Bell Wright's books enjoyable, I'm sure. His thoughts are so sa-ad!"

"You find sad thoughts 'enjoyable'?"

"If I do say it myself, Mrs. Houghton, I am without a touch of frivol'ty in my composition."

"How tragic!"

"But at the same time, I like gay, glad thoughts, too. Sunshine mingled with Shadow. *Pollyanna*, for instance, I found wery instructive. Didn't you, Missus?"

"It's title, *The Glad Book*, was as far as I could get. Too depressing!"

"I had hoped, from what your sisters said of you, to find in you a kindred mind."

"My sisters flatter me!"

"They speak wery well of you. They said you love a book as I do."

"I'm afraid not as you do, Miss Miller."

"You don't dearly love a book?"

"It depends upon the book."

Miss Miller bent her head to one side, considering. "Yes," she concluded, thoughtfully, "it does. Some books are more interesting than other books."

"I have noticed that myself."

"I am very pertikkler about the story books which I recommend to my pu-pills—that they shall be Clean and Wholesome." She repeated the words lovingly. "Clean and Wholesome. Books that have no bad children, no bad words, no bad morals, no bad example. Also nothing to frighten the Child—no ogres or giants. Only what is sweet and happy and lovely and—and—Clean and Wholesome."

"My God!" breathed Susan. "Where would you ever find such an insipid book as that, Miss Miller? Or where the child that would read it?"

"It's the only kind I permit in my school library," said Miss Miller, primly, disapprovingly.

"But do you forget how when you were a child you thrilled and tingled over ogres and giants and bad children? Why, you can't have an interesting story out of just good people. Nothing ever seems to happen to them. Don't you see your rule would prohibit Mark Twain and Booth Tarkington and James Whitcomb Riley and Dickens and Robert Burns and——"

Susan stopped short as she noticed Miss Miller's embarrassment before this array of names. "She's not to be taken seriously," she decided—and changed the subject. "I understand, Miss Miller, that you are making a specialty in your school of—er—etiquette?"

"Yes," Miss Miller eagerly responded, recovering from her confusion at the heavy battery with which Susan had refuted her plea for Clean, Wholesome Insipidity, and glad to return to familiar ground, "and I find that my pu-pills are very receptive to my sudgestions."

"You are making Chesterfields of your Pennsylvania Dutch boys and girls?"

"Chesterfields was, I believe, Missus, a foreigner and an aristocrat? *No!*" Miss Miller democratically repudiated all such. "Amurican manners for our Amurican boys and girls! An Amurican gentleman, an Amurican lady—that is my highest ambition for our young people of Reifsville."

"How do you go about it?" asked Susan, curiously.

Miss Miller, in her reply, did not talk, she recited:

"I train them in the accepted usages of the best society in every walk of life, from the kitchen to the parlour; from the cottage to the mansion. Yesterday, for instance, I gave them a lesson in Interductions; the etiquette to be observed is to accompany the gent to the lady who, if seated, does not rise; whereupon both bow; the interducer then retires and the interduced at once enter into conversation."

"Your pupils will find this instruction very useful, I'm sure," murmured Susan.

"I teach them what are breaches of etiquette in a social gathering of the best society—such as whispering. I tell them what to do if they commit those breaches—such as, If you strike against another in the street, apologize with, *I beg pardon*. I try also to inculcate grace; I endeavour to show my young folks that grace should attend all movements; that walking, speaking, *and* so forth should be at once refined and unostentatious. There is a great art in making a bow dignified and stately while neither stiff nor awkward."

"I should say there was! A difficult feat, Miss Miller!"

"With patience it can be acquired. I myself acquired this graceful accomplishment with only a little practice."

"I should think it would take an acrobat to strike

such a happy balance! Come, Josie," Susan put an end to the lesson in etiquette.

"Poor Lizzie and Addie!" she reflected on the way home, "trying to live up to that poor donkey! And if I tried to show them what a great big bluff she is, they'd only think I was jealous of her!"

As Susan had not dreamed for an instant that Josie had noticed the sort of shop at which she had made her purchases that day, great was her astonishment when, at the supper table, he announced to his father, "Mother has some change let over from her trading, Father. She traded at a new kind of store where everything costs a couple cents littler than what it does at Diffenderfer's, or Saltz-gibbler's."

It seemed to Joe, when explanations followed, like actual thieving from him that Susan should have handed that dollar, saved from her shopping, to her sisters.

Susan tried, for Josie's own sake, to break him of his pernicious tattling.

"I'm going to drive to Middleburg this afternoon, Josie," she told him one day a few weeks later, "and I don't intend to take you with me, because the last time I took you driving you were very unkind and made your father angry with me. So to-day I shall leave you at home."

"You're afraid I'll tell Father what you sneak to the Aunties!"

"I'm leaving you at home to punish you for being unkind to me. I don't want a mischief-maker with me."

"I'll tell Father you're punishing me for telling him you gave Aunties things!"

"Why do you like to make me uncomfortable, Josie? I don't like to make you unhappy."

"Yes, you do! You like to *let* me when you go to

Middleburg!" he whimpered. "I'll tell Father to *make* you take me!"

When Joe was informed of the proposed trip to Middleburg without Josie, to punish the boy for tattling, he simply put the car out of commission for Susan by removing the ignition tip.

"That fixes that little idea of yours, Susan!" he told her, chuckling; and Josie eyed her triumphantly.

At such times she not only disliked Josie, she shrank from him. She knew that Sidney's boy, who was constantly at the cottage during the few months of the year that the big house was occupied by its owners, was incapable of petty meannesses like this; that he was a generous, warm-hearted lad; and she wished, almost passionately, that her foster-child were more like Georgie.

But Josie, though spoiled, tyrannical, and mean, could be extraordinarily lovable. He was very handsome; he was intelligent and responsive to her teaching as well as in the reading that they did together; and, in his own selfish way, he adored his step-mother. At times he had a cuddling, demonstrative way with her that acted like an antidote to the poison of his little basenesses.

And, strongest appeal of all to Susan, Josie believed her to be his own mother. His very tyrannies presupposed a sense of exclusive possession which somehow made her feel that she and Josie did inalienably belong to each other. Joe had scrupulously kept the promise he had made to her before their marriage—that his boy should never know through him that Susan was not his own mother.

Sidney's increasing indebtedness to Joe and his consequently decreasing income obliged him to spend more and more of his time quietly at White Oak Farm. It was evident enough that only the stress of

circumstances, and not choice, kept him there, for almost in the very hour that his quarterly income fell due he was off again upon another orgy of extravagance: racing, betting, yachting, luxurious travelling with people of ten times his means.

Occasionally there were large and festive house parties at the big house, with decorators, caterers, and orchestras for dancing, all brought from Philadelphia.

Georgie and Josie played and quarrelled together all day long, and Susan's heart often reproached her because her step-son seemed to her so much less lovable than Sidney's boy. Georgie was a dreamy, thoughtful, gentle child who, behind his slow, quiet manner, had an unusually strong personality. It was really startling, sometimes, to see him, after having submitted for days, with entire indifference, to Josie's aggressive and tyrannical self-assertion, suddenly and quite unexpectedly turn upon his oppressor with an alarming fury, for some offence much less aggravating (to the ordinary judgment) than the things which he had meekly borne without a murmur. For instance, Josie learned, after three times receiving a blow in the face from Georgie's fist, as punishment, never to dare to speak rudely to Susan before his cousin. Susan wished that she were as good a disciplinarian where Josie was concerned.

On one of these occasions Joe happened to be a witness to the chastisement inflicted by his nephew upon his son; and the snarling resentment with which he flung himself upon Georgie to beat him, all the concentrated hate of years of bitter jealousy ready to wreak itself upon his defenceless little nephew, made Susan, with a blind impulse of protection, rush between them, tear the child from Joe's terrible blows, and stand panting and defiant before him;

while Sidney, who, at Georgie's cries, had rushed down the terrace to the cottage door, picked up his quivering son and held him in his arms—looking on, as white as linen, at Susan's fierce defiance of her husband's brutality.

"It's Josie you should beat, not Georgie!—if you must beat a child! You *encourage* Josie to speak to me so rudely that even this child"—her hand on Georgie, who trembled in his father's arms—"resents it! Teach Josie to respect me as Georgie does before you dare to lay a finger on Georgie."

She turned and went into the cottage, while Sidney, looking ghastly, carried Georgie home to the big house.

But a few days later, when again the two boys were together, Josie, thinking that Georgie having had a dreadful warning against striking him, could now be teased and tormented to any extent without daring to defend himself or to fight for his "Aunt Susan," ventured again to use rude language to his mother—with the prompt result of a blow in the face that knocked him down.

Susan had noticed the fact that Georgie had struck before looking about to see whether his Uncle Joe were in sight.

While Josie ran screaming for his father she made Georgie run home as fast as his legs would carry him.

Georgie was with her one evening when Lizzie and Addie happened to drive over from Reifsville to see her. They very seldom came to her home, for they realized that Joe, in his fear of Susan's giving them something, did not make them welcome. But Susan had not been to see them for over a week and they had become anxious.

"I overtaxed myself with canning and preserving last week," Susan explained, as they all sat together on the cottage porch, the two boys playing

near by on the lawn. "And I came down with a nervous sick headache that kept me in bed two days. This is my first day out of bed."

She was leaning back in a rocking-chair looking pale and pensive, and her sisters regarded her with loving anxiety.

"If only Joe'd hire fur you, Susie! You wasn't never used to hard work; us we always spared you all we could."

"Joe seems unable to see that he loses out by my overworking; I had to have the doctor; and for two days Joe had to cook and wait on me. He wanted to send for you, Lizzie, but I would not have it. Addie could not be left alone with all the work over there."

"Who's the little boy playing with Josie?" asked Addie.

"Sidney's son."

The announcement was followed by a silence which seemed to Susan to take on the character of a deep and pregnant stillness. She glanced at her sisters. They both looked white and frightened.

"Poor things!" thought Susan, "I suppose they're thinking of my child—that was Sidney's!"

Before her sisters left, Lizzie walked hesitatingly across the grass and drawing Georgie to her, looked long into his face; then stooped and gently kissed him.

Susan saw, to her astonishment, as she said good-night to her sisters, that they were both crying.

"They would have loved my baby so!" she reflected, mournfully, as she walked slowly into the house.

It was that night, when she and Joe were alone in their room, that she learned of the immediately impending great change in her life. Joe informed her quite casually that Sidney had come to the end of his rope.

"I left him go to it and spend! I left him borrow off of me all he wanted; and him, the poor simp, never seen through it! Thought I was bein' brotherly and generous! Me! To him! Him that his mom always learnt to treat me like the dirt under his feet! Well, now I *got* him! He's in my power! He owes me more'n he kin ever pay!"

"What are you proposing to do?"

"Next month us we move into the big house and Sid and his Missus and his kid *moves in here!*"

"They'll never do it!" exclaimed Susan, startled. "Move in here! They can't be *that* poor!"

"I tell you Sid has run through with every dollar of his principal. Ain't he the darned fool though! All he'll have to live on for the rest part of his life is the rent of White Oak Farm, and only part of *that*, fur half of it goes to pay me back what he's borrowed off of me."

"His wife will surely leave him; she will never live in this cottage!"

"But her money's all, too. And you know her father died a couple years back a'ready. So it's this here cottage fur her, or work fur her livin'! And as she wasn't raised to fit into neither of them humble stations in life, here's *your* turn, Susan, to come it over her the way she's been turnin' *you* down ever since I got married to you. If you don't give her as good as what she always sent you, I won't think much of your spunk!"

"She never lifted a finger to hurt me; she never for a moment had it in her power to! And I don't think, Joe, that I have it in my power to hurt her. Her life and mine simply do not touch."

"That ain't the high-minded way *she's* feelin', I bet you! I bet you she's eatin' her heart out with spite that now you're a-goin' to be in her place, to hold your head as high as what she held hern and to

turn up your nose at her the way she done to you!"

Susan wondered, as she lay sleepless that night, whether Sidney, like Joe, knew her so little as to think that because he had once done her a great, irreparable injury, she now gloated over his downfall. She searched her heart to learn what really she felt about this strange twist of fate that was taking from Sidney and giving to her all those things for which he had once sacrificed her. And all she could find there was a profound indifference. Sidney no longer seemed a part of her life.

"Georgie is the only one in that family that interests me in the least," she decided, as she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE BIG HOUSE

SUSAN was early given to understand, after the removal to the big house, that Joe expected to live there very much as he had previously lived there with a succession of hired housekeepers; keeping the greater part of the old house shut off to save coal. He would have liked to limit their occupancy to the kitchen and their bedrooms, if he had had his undisputed way. And indeed Susan's utmost revolt against such a régime got her only so far as to win his consent to their using the dining room and parlour on festive occasions such as Christmas or Josie's birthday, or when they had company.

Joe was deeply chagrined when Sidney, instead of meekly moving his family into the tenant's cottage, removed them clear out of the neighbourhood.

Susan would have been relieved at this except for her sorrow at parting from Georgie.

"Never you mind," Joe consoled himself in the form of giving comfort to Susan for Sidney's failure to play up to the tragic humiliation so carefully staged for him. "He'll be drove into livin' in that there cottage *yet*, you mind if he ain't! My only *re-gret* is that his mother ain't alive to see this day, when I'm on top with him under my heel; her that didn't think me good enough to live in the same house with her son and had me turned out of my own

father's house! Her a stranger comin' in and turnin' me out of my father's house!"

Susan had learned to dread Joe's reminiscences of his boyhood, such red-hot passion of bitterness and resentment they always aroused in him. No doubt if his step-mother had been openly and intentionally cruel, instead of just limited in perception and sympathy to the circle of her own personal interests, he could have found it less impossible to forgive her.

"And now," Joe continued, "it's *my* turn to open the door and say, 'Get out! You ain't got the price to stay here!' Oh, I ain't done with Sid Houghton yet, Susan! Don't you think it!"

Sometimes Susan was afraid of her old propensity to experiment with situations; to try out the effect of some unexpected announcement, like that thrilling experiment of giving Sidney's mother the impression that his Uncle George wanted to marry her. She was afraid sometimes lest she leap over the precipice by suddenly saying to Joe, "You think Sidney and his mother greatly wronged you. But they did you a greater wrong than any you know of! They long ago slew the soul that once dwelt in this shell you call your wife! This woman you've married was once your hated brother's mistress! *She bore him a child!*"

Where Sidney removed his family Joe never learned. But before a year went by his prophecy came true and dire need drove the younger brother back to appeal for help once more.

Meantime, Susan, finding herself the pseudo-mistress of a mansion, decided to test the possibility of having Eleanor Arnold and perhaps a few more of her old school friends visit her.

The necessity of keeping at least one servant to help with the work of the big house even Joe had recognized. But when Susan, in preparing for

Eleanor's arrival, undertook to teach the Pennsylvania Dutch farmer's daughter in her employ the ways of a waitress, she found that ploughing would have been fairy's work by comparison.

"Why must folks be so awful waited on just fur to eat their wittles?" the girl would ask, wonderingly. "Why can't they do their own stretchin' at the table?"

Joe really suffered when, inquiring at supper for the pound of roquefort cheese he had "fetched" from town the day before, he was told by the girl, "They sent you spoilt and mouldy cheese yet! With green spots at! I throwed it quick away so's you wouldn't poison yourself!"

An Edom cheese which arrived with a basket of provisions from the grocery she took for a *jardinière* and placed in the middle of the dining-room table on a centrepiece.

Doilies she called "tidies" for a long time; then they began to be "dailies" and "doolies," but never by any chance did she hit upon the vowel *oi*.

Joe and Josie made Susan's work of training the girl much harder by refusing to fall in and coöperate and by openly sneering at her "tony airs", though Josie, in whom there was an æsthetic, effeminate streak, was only feigning scorn to curry favour with his father; he really adored "the ways of high society", as his father called their waitress's clumsy ministrations.

Though Eleanor Arnold was the most tactful of guests, her visit was, for the most part, too great a strain upon both Susan and herself ever to be repeated. Joe coming to the table in his shirt sleeves and minus a collar; grumbling at the delay caused by a little service between a few courses and openly making fun of it; commenting on Susan's extravagance in using cream on the table which ought to be saved

for butter to be sold at market; reproving her for increasing the price of the laundry by her frequent changes of the table linen; objecting to her making the coffee so strong—"You use enough for one meal to do for three and that there coffee thirty-five cents a pound yet!"

The meals came to be times of torment to Eleanor in her mortification for Susan and her keen sympathy for what seemed an intolerable degradation.

It bored her also to have Susan working in the kitchen and about the house for nearly two thirds of the day instead of giving herself up to her. Joe, however, seemed to think that his wife was taking an unwarranted holiday, his table talk being ornamented with sarcastic references to her "settin' 'round", her "pleasure-seekin'", her "runnin'".

It was made painfully evident to Eleanor that poor Susan had had to put up a stiff fight to have a guest at all, even on such uncomfortable terms as these.

It seemed to be in sheer malice that Joe one day, during Eleanor's visit, brought from town in his car several bushels of plums to be preserved and canned.

"But our own plums will be ripe next month; why did you buy these?" Susan, in consternation, inquired, as he pointed out to her and Eleanor the "bargain" he was unloading from his car.

"Our plum preserves is all; and I don't feel fur waitin' till next month till I taste plum preserves again. I feel fur some *now*. I got these here wery cheap."

"No wonder! They are the miserable little hard kind that are the very dickens to seed!" exclaimed Susan, despairingly. "This is two days' work! I don't see how——"

"Miss Arnold kin help you, I guess," said Joe as he carried the heavy load of fruit into the kitchen.

Susan knew, of course, that it was not an unconquerable yearning for plum preserves, but a determination to make it impossible for her to spend an idle minute for the next few days at least, that had prompted the purchase of the plums.

During the next hour, before they assembled at supper (Joe insisted upon a noon dinner), Susan was rather silent and thoughtful as she and Eleanor strolled about the grounds. If Joe's plum scheme succeeded he would surely not stop there, but would manage to find a still heavier task to follow it.

"In self-defence I've got to make it fail," she thought.

"Eleanor, you know something about chemistry, don't you?" she presently asked, irrelevantly, in the midst of a discussion of the newest thing in blouses (which topic had been guilefully introduced by Eleanor with a purpose). "Can you tell me what I can do to those plums to make them seem to have rotted overnight? We can drive into town to-night to a drug-store if you do know——"

"Concentrated sulphuric acid will do the job."

During the drive to town Eleanor resumed the discussion of blouses, leading tactfully, as she thought, up to the fact that Susan's were out of date and that she needed some new ones.

"I get your point, my love," smiled Susan. "I was never one not to know the latest style in blouses! It's lack of money and time that makes me dress so abominably."

"Has your husband had reverses, Susan?"

"Joe never has reverses. He's too cautious ever to lose money. He seems to be piling it up constantly. But *I* don't benefit by it."

"White Oak Farm is such a lovely home—you could have such larks in that charming place! You ought not to submit, Susan, dear!"

"By the way, I have no money (I never have any) to buy the concentrated sulphuric acid. I meant to charge it and have the bill sent to Joe—but I'm just beginning to see that that won't do. He will be sure to ask me what I wanted with concentrated sulphuric acid and that would give away my part in rotting the plums. I want him to think he has been cheated in them—then he will never again risk buying fruit in town. How shall I manage it?"

"That's easy. Tell him you used the concentrated sulphuric acid as a throat lotion or a hair tonic or a tooth wash."

Crafty as Joe himself was, it was difficult for him to conceive of a cunning in another that would deliberately ruin and waste. Thrift was so ingrained in his very bones that he simply could not imagine his own wife setting herself to the task of wantonly destroying several bushels of food for which he had paid out hard cash. Therefore he never suspected her and Eleanor of their perfidious part in the tragedy that confronted him early next morning in his kitchen, when the maid pointed out to him the condition of the fruit he had bought.

His manifest suffering for several days caused Eleanor a deep and sweet contentment that almost compensated her for the manifold miseries of her visit.

While Josie seemed to respect and be greatly attached to his father, he did not try to emulate his roughness, but was, on the contrary, over-fastidious in trifles; irritatingly nice about things which did not really matter. Joe, far from criticizing this in his son, as he criticized his wife's tastes, appeared to take pride in it.

In some respects it seemed that Josie would never grow up; in his love, for instance, of being petted, fondled, and made much of by Susan even after he

had reached an age when most boys would have resented a public caress as the grossest insult. The most effectual punishments Susan had ever imposed upon him had been to refrain for a time from all demonstration of affection for him. He was, like his father, extremely penurious and he seemed to feel, even now at the age of sixteen, as greatly defrauded by her kisses withheld as he would have felt if someone had cheated him of dollars and cents.

"He is the strangest mixture, my dear!" Eleanor wondered over him as the two friends sat on the piazza one evening before supper. "*I* would not know how to deal with him! The way he seems to adore you and yet so often goes ruthlessly against you and hurts you!—the flinty hardness with which, just like his father, he will drive a bargain!—and yet he will bawl like a girl for something he wants that his father says he can't have!"

Both Joe and his son displayed, during Eleanor's entire visit, a childish jealousy of Susan's regard for her friend which added not a little to the guest's discomfort. In Josie it often took the form of a covert or even an open rudeness toward Eleanor. He would not answer her greeting when they came together in the morning; he would utter what he meant to be biting remarks on the neglect he was just now suffering at his mother's hands. "For the past six days I've not had you to myself an hour!" He would never permit his mother and her friend, when he was at home, to sit alone together for ten minutes at a time without interrupting them with some demand from Susan for attention or service.

"This shirt needs a button—I wish, Mother, you weren't too busy gabbling all the time to keep my clothes mended!"

As Susan never put his shirts away buttonless, she

suspected him of cutting off the buttons to make an excuse for taxing her attention.

He would call her to massage his head for an attack of neuralgia; to read to him because his eyes ached; to help him with his lessons.

Just once, when he was deliberately impertinent to Eleanor, Susan's forbearance broke down. He had overheard his mother speak to her guest of an automobile ride they would take that day to "Chickies Rock" and he had interrupted with the assertion that *he* wanted the car that night.

"What for, Josie?" Susan inquired.

His hesitation betrayed that his demand was entirely impromptu and that he had no goal in view.

"I'm going to drive over to Middleburg to get some books from the library," he answered after an instant.

"It is too far for an evening's trip," Susan objected.

"Well, anyway, I want the car this evening, Mother."

"You can't have it, Josie."

"I'll ask Father whether I can't!"

"He won't let you drive to Middleburg at night."

"Then I'll go over to Reifsville to see Aunt Addie and Aunt Lizzie."

"Why don't you come with us to Chickies Rock, Josie?" asked Eleanor, pleasantly.

Josie, muttering something about not caring for the society of "an old maid," flung himself out of his mother's room where the discussion had taken place—leaving Eleanor looking pained for Susan, and Susan herself suddenly livid with her rarely roused anger.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" cried Eleanor, "for that boy's own sake you must not be so forbearing!"

"I know I must not! Excuse me a minute, Eleanor."

Susan left the room and in ten minutes returned

with a very abject and embarrassed Josie who sullenly apologized to Eleanor for his rudeness.

"How did you make him do it?" asked Eleanor, curiously, when they were again alone.

"I told him he could not come near me or speak to me again until he had apologized to you; and as he can't stand being alienated from me, he did it."

"How you ever endure it all!" breathed Eleanor.

"I care for Josie a lot," Susan admitted. "Oh, Eleanor, the only thing I shall have accomplished when my life is over, is the bringing up of Josie, and if he is a failure, *I* shall be."

"You've no doubt given him much, Susan; but when certain qualities are lacking in a character no one can supply the lack."

"He has been really improving since he has been attending the Middleburg High School."

"Heavens! what must he have been!"

"I've hopes of what college may do for, or *to*, him, Eleanor!"

Eleanor was silent. Susan knew how tragically empty, sombre, wasted, her friend considered her life. "Yet she doesn't know the worst I've lived through! —the way my youth was blasted, devastated!" she thought. "If I should suddenly reveal it to her!"

Once or twice a vague, inexplicable look in Eleanor's eyes as they rested upon her made Susan wonder whether she did have a suspicion of how deep and vital her relation to Sidney had been.

Susan was, however, very far from the truth as to Eleanor's real suspicion concerning her and Sidney.

It was during this visit of Eleanor's that Susan was greatly surprised one afternoon, while she and her guest were sitting on the wide piazza that surrounded the house, an hour before their six o'clock supper, to receive a letter in the mail which Josie brought from the White Oak Station post office, from Sid-

ney's wife. Sidney's wife writing to her! A rather extraordinary communication, considering all the circumstances.

While Eleanor, busy with her own mail, remained unobservant of her, Susan read her letter through twice very slowly.

My dear Susan (if I may presume upon our relation to call you so) Sidney and I are feeling so homesick for our old home! It is just eight months ago to-day that circumstances forced us to give it up to you and your family. We should just love to spend a few quiet weeks at White Oak Farm if you will be so very kind as to permit us. The simple truth is we have no place to go just now until we are due next month at the Sherwins. I am ill, and it is possible I may not be well enough to go to the Sherwins when Sidney goes. So if you can accommodate both of us for a few weeks and me for a bit longer if I am not strong enough to travel, I shall be glad, in return, to be of use to you in any way I can. I should like to introduce some of my Middleburg friends to you—I think it might be mutually profitable for us to spend a few weeks together at White Oak Farm. I am longing for my home, the dear old place! I shall very much appreciate your kindness if you can make room for us.

Sincerely yours,

LAURA BERESFORD HOUGHTON.

P. S. We have placed Georgie in a school where he will remain as a summer boarder. So, you see, we are not asking you to be troubled with him. We have saved enough out of the wreck of our fortunes to educate Georgie, whatever may betide.

When Eleanor, having gone through her own mail, looked up, Susan, without comment, handed Laura the astonishing letter to her.

"Well!" Eleanor exclaimed when she had read it. "of all the cold-blooded propositions! After ignoring you for years while you were living right here

beside her, to invite herself now to come and visit you!—offering as a bribe to introduce you into Middleburg society! She must be terribly stranded, poor Laura!”

“She seems to look upon White Oak Farm as more her home than ours, though we are renting it from Sidney,” said Susan.

“But she must know she has no sort of claim upon the place while you are living here as its tenants. What shall you do, Susan?”

“If Georgie were with them I’d be tempted to tell them to come!”

Eleanor glanced at her swiftly, and Susan saw, to her surprise, that her friend was flushing crimson.

“You are strangely fond of that boy, Susie, dear!”

“I know it. He has always appealed to me more than any child I’ve ever known. And now that he is no longer a child, he is more appealing than ever! It is strange, I know, that I should feel so. But it’s because of the boy himself—not any survival of my feeling for his father, I assure you! He is a lovely boy!”

“Is he? I’ve not seen him since he was a baby.”

“He is full of talent; and he is altogether fine and lovable, I think!” Susan softly cried, her bosom heaving, a wistfulness in her voice. “I can’t help it, I love him!”

“I’ve never heard you warm up like that about Josie,” remarked Eleanor, her eyes downcast, averted.

“I suppose you think me very spineless, Eleanor, to be able to care for Sidney’s boy like that!”

“What are you going to say to Laura, Susan?”

“I’m afraid I think her letter too impertinent to deserve a reply. I think I shall not answer it.”

“They may take your silence for consent and dump themselves down upon you!”

"The tenant's cottage is ready for them at any time."

"Would you have the backbone to refuse to receive them here if they came and presented themselves?"

"I shall not entertain them as my guests, Eleanor."

"It would take a staff of servants to keep them going!" said Eleanor.

At dinner they learned from Joe that he had had a letter from Sidney very similar to Susan's from Laura.

"Says he's willing to do a bit of farm work for me, a couple hours every day, if I'll put him and Missus up fur a couple weeks or so!"

Joe chuckled disgustingly. "Listen to here!" He opened the letter and read them passages: "In view of your many favours to me in the past"—"This time it isn't money, but your hospitality,"—"Say, I wisht yous ladies would have saw the telegraft I wrote off to him! 'Your cottage at the foot of the terraces is ready for you any time you care to occupy,' I wrote. That's all I sayed. Your cottage ready for you! Ain't that a side-winder fur my elegant brother Sid, though? Gee whiz! I never enjoyed myself more in all my life than I enjoyed myself sendin' that there telegraft! Say! I'd like to have a photograph of his mug took whiles he's readin' my telegraft!"

Susan, as she heard her husband, decided not to let him know of her letter from Laura. His joy was too unholy.

"If they're too stuck-up to come and live in the cottage," continued Joe, "leave Missus sell some of her jewels or furs that she throwed away so much money on. I guess," he chuckled, "I surprised her and Sid some last winter (ain't, Susan?) when me I bought *my* wife sich a fur set, too. Cost me forty-two fifty. Yes, sir! I guess Sid and Missus took

notice to it all right, when they seen you wearin' it, Susan! Well, I guess, anyhow—a set that cost forty-two fifty! It was a awful good set,” he gravely almost reverently explained to Eleanor. “*Ought* to be—I paid forty-two fifty for it. When I do buy I b’leeve in buyin’ *good*. No cheap trash. Forty-two fifty—yes, sir. It was a big outlay, I’ll admit. But Susie she wanted some furs and says I to myself, ‘All right, if she wants furs she’s a-goin’ to have some. Sid’s Missus ain’t the only lady kin afford to walk ’round here lookin’ like a Esquimaux.’ So I up and got Susie a set. Forty-two fifty I paid, yes, sir! You’d har’ly b’leeve it, but that’s what it cost me. Forty-two fifty.”

Susan did not try to check him or to cover his peculiarities. It would have been so futile. She let Eleanor have it all.

Their gathering together at the table, however, came to be a time of misery to the two women.

“If Sidney does come to the cottage, Susan, what shall you do?” Eleanor asked the next day.

“What I have always done—go my way unmindful of them.”

“Which are you, Susan—very callous or very wise?”

“Stultified, Eleanor.”

“I predict you’ll revive some day!”

“But I’m getting on. I’m thirty-five, you know.”

“You don’t look a day more than twenty-five. And poor Laura looks any old age! Yet to any casual observer, how much more reason you would have for looking prematurely old! In a sense, Susan, you’ve lived religiously; with self-restraint and unselfishly; while those others have forged ahead recklessly, living only for their self-gratification. And yet,” Eleanor shrugged, “they’d call you and me irreligious, Susie, wouldn’t they?—because

we don't believe in their respectable little creeds and ceremonies and delusions, the opiates with which they hull and delude themselves! If a live teacher of real religion turns up, see how quickly they crucify him to-day just as in the past! 'Be ye not' conformed to this world,' saith the Scriptures; but who are quicker than Christians to jump on you with both feet the moment you *don't* conform to this world! The man who does conform to the common standard is the only acceptable man to society and to the church."

"Why can't we realize," said Susan, "that it is only when a man *revolts* from the common standard that he becomes worth hearing? Aren't we a tiresome race!"

"I wonder whether it is any better on Mars," Eleanor speculated.

Contrary to Eleanor's prediction, Laura and Sidney arrived a few days later to occupy the cottage.

"I didn't think they'd ever bring themselves to it," she told Susan. "And now I don't know whether to run in to see Laura or not. It might be just intolerably humiliating to her!"

"Does the size of the house she lives in matter such a lot? You will go to see *her*, not her house."

"You've answered me; I go," nodded Eleanor.

When, the next morning, she carried out her resolution, she was shocked to find Laura, very white and weak, lying on a couch in the tiny dining room of the cottage, looking as though she were dying.

She brightened at the unexpected sight of Eleanor and welcomed her eagerly, almost cheerfully.

"Money worries; and living at too rapid a pace," she explained her plight. "I tried to keep up with Sidney. Personally, I should have preferred a little less strenuousness. And then—unhappiness, Eleanor! Sidney and I have never been really

happy together. It's a general breaking up; I know I can't live long—and I don't want to."

Eleanor could see that poor Laura undoubtedly spoke the truth; she was doomed. One saw it so unmistakably in her dimmed eyes, her pinched nostrils, her colourless lips, the whole blighted aspect of her.

"She *is* going to die!" thought Eleanor, sombrely. "But Susan's fate is worse—a living death!"

"This human scene makes me sick!" Eleanor burst out. "Look at the confusion in the world everywhere! We human beings seem as incapable of arranging life in a sane and wise order for *all* of us as a lot of cats and dogs would be! *Just* as incapable!"

Laura stared. "Is this supposed to be apropos of my impending death, Eleanor?"

"Laura, dear!" Eleanor seated on a low stool beside the couch, gently clasped the sick woman's hand. "If society had forced you to serve it—not permitted you to be a parasite—you would not now be here in this cottage dying!"

"I'm not sorry I'm dying. Life does not interest me any more. I am so bored that I *want* to die!"

"It's because your interests and activities were always shallow surface affairs that never struck root, and so were doomed to an early withering; and now that they are gone, you've nothing left! It's rather ghastly!"

"I've nothing left; that's true," repeated Laura. "Maybe if I'd had a child——"

She stopped short.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Presently Eleanor repeated, "If you'd had a child? What do you mean, dear?"

"I mean—a daughter."

Eleanor came to a sudden decision. "Laura, will

you tell me something I want very much to know, and which only you *can* tell me?" she softly asked.

"What is it?"

"I would not ask you this question if it were not a matter of great importance to me; if I did not believe you are right about not having long to live. It is because I believe that, that I *must* have the truth about this thing; a suspicion that has been growing in my heart these many years and which lately has become almost a conviction. But you alone can make me absolutely sure——"

"Eleanor! You are as white as death! What is it?"

"Tell me—*is Georgie your own son?*"

Laura's faded eyes fell from Eleanor's burning gaze, and she did not reply.

"I am answered: he is not. *Whose child is he?*"

"Why do you ask, Eleanor? What made you think he was not mine?"

"Didn't anyone else ever think he was not yours?"

"Never. Unmotherly mothers are too common in these days, I suppose!" said Laura, a touch of sadness in her tired voice.

"Who is Georgie's mother, Laura?"

"She died at his birth. She was Sidney's mistress. I saw her once for a few minutes in Sidney's rooms, but I didn't know she was going to have a child; and I married him in haste to keep *her* from forcing him to marry her. I did not dream she was going to have a child!"

"Who was she?"

"I never knew her name. Sidney would never tell me and I was not interested in knowing. Her father brought the baby to Sidney the very night we were married and threatened him with all kinds of trouble if he did not take the child and bring him up as his own son. We left the baby with Sidney's mother

and went abroad. Mrs. Houghton put it in the care of a farmer's family; and as soon as we returned home Sidney insisted, against my wishes, upon taking the child. I never would have consented but that I didn't want to go through the agony of having a child myself and Sidney had to have a son to inherit his Uncle George's estate, or it would go to Joe's boy. So, for the sake of keeping this estate in our hands, I consented to take Georgie and pass him off as ours. And after all the fuss and trouble of it, the disgusting lies I've had to tell, the criticism I've had to bear for not being motherly—after all this, here we are, just where we'd have been if we had never acknowledged Georgie at all—Joe Houghton has White Oak Farm!"

"But Georgie will have it when he is of age?"

"If he is anything like his father, he will never earn money enough to keep it going. And all that Sidney inherited is of course squandered; and my inheritance went after it!"

"Laura! How do you know Georgie's mother died?"

"Her father said so when he brought the baby to Sidney. Our wedding journey was more like a funeral than a joy trip, Sidney felt her death so terribly!"

"Have you truly, truly always believed that Georgie's mother was dead? Have you never suspected, Laura, *who* was his mother?"

Laura stared, speechless, into Eleanor's white face.

"Haven't you had a *reason*, Laura, for ignoring your sister-in-law as you have done?"

"My sister-in-law? You mean Joe Houghton's wife? *What* do you mean?"

"Haven't you ever noticed," pursued Eleanor, breathlessly, her bosom heaving tumultuously, "how fatally Georgie resembles—Joe's wife? The first time I ever saw Georgie I took him for Susan's own

child! And he *is* her child! She doesn't know it, but he is! See how she idolizes him! It's her blood calling to his!"

"You're crazy!" gasped Laura; and Eleanor, in her blind eagerness to get at the truth, for Susan's sake, failed to realize Laura's dangerous agitation. "Joe's wife Sidney's mistress! You're crazy, Eleanor!" Laura laughed wildly. "It's melodramatic! Georgie, Sidney's son, is, you say, the illegitimate child of Joe Houghton's wife! And she for fifteen years living next door to him and mothering him every chance she could get and never knowing he was hers!" Laura almost screamed with laughter, and Eleanor took alarm. "But perhaps Susan *has* known it," Laura went on with shrill irony. "Perhaps she, like me, has played her part so that her son may illegally get White Oak Farm when it really belongs to Josie!"

"But morally it belongs to Georgie!" Eleanor maintained. "And—and, Laura, I'm going——"

The door opened and Sidney, having been drawn by Laura's unnatural laughter, walked into the room.

He looked shabby and wretched, but retained, nevertheless, a vestige of his old elegance.

"Hear! Hear, Sidney, Eleanor's wonderful melodrama!" cried Laura, hoarsely, "in which you are the villain, Joe Houghton and I the martyred hero and heroine, Susan the—what's her part? Injured innocence? Or did she wickedly lure two innocent brothers? What a plot! Has Joe known all along that his wife was the mother of Sidney's son and has he been working all these years for revenge, by getting Sidney into his power? Has he? And you, Sidney, you poor donkey, you never suspected your brother of plotting to get you into his power! I've been warning you for five years that Joe's seeming generosity was a trap! But," she groaned, "whenever you

wanted money, you'd believe that any devil who offered you some was an angel of light! Now, you see! I was right; and you were a fool!"

Sidney, standing white and shaken at Laura's side, turned agonized, questioning eyes to Eleanor. "You'll kill Laura! Her heart is weak—— What is this tale you are telling her? The doctor forbids the least excitement for her! She——"

"Eleanor thinks that *Georgie is Susan's son!*" interrupted Laura in uncontrollable excitement. "Did you ever hear of anything more grotesque? Her only reason seems to be that he looks like her and that she's fond of him. Explain to her, Sidney, that Georgie's mother was safely dead and buried sixteen years ago!"

"Of course she was!" affirmed Sidney in a shaking voice. "Your suspicion is ridiculous, Miss Arnold! Perfectly ridiculous!"

"Perhaps it is," said Eleanor, uncertainly, "but——"

"Don't you see it wouldn't do," cried Laura, mockingly, her eyes looking feverish, "to have Susan turn out to be Georgie's mother—for if Joe found it out he would divorce her, and Joe's a millionaire; he may die before Susan and leave her one third of his estate, which will in time pass on to Georgie—everything and everybody must be sacrificed for Georgie!—legality and honour and marriage vows and wives! For if Georgie were illegitimate, you see, Josie would get White Oak Farm! Which of course must not happen! Who would think that an old man's will could cause such crime and suffering?"

Eleanor rose. "I'm going now, Laura, dear—I am terribly sorry I have excited you so! My idea was absurd, of course. I, too, would hate to see Josie get White Oak Farm, for he is detestable. Forget what I've said!"

Sidney, a look of fear in his eyes, hesitatingly followed her to the door.

"I assure you, Miss Arnold, there's nothing whatever in this idea of yours—I never heard anything more far-fetched—anything more preposterous! You won't—you won't spread it about any further, will you? You—you have not suggested it to Joe or Susan, have you? You know how much a suggestion can sometimes take root without any least proof, and——"

"Mr. Houghton," said Eleanor, as he stopped, floundering, "you can trust me to do and say nothing that will injure either Susan or—or her son. Susan may outlive her husband and inherit wealth. I'll keep quiet for a while, anyway—a little while——"

Not giving him time to reply, she turned away and almost ran out of the cottage.

Sidney, when she had gone, returned slowly, with the step of an old man, to his wife's couch.

She was lying back among the cushions, weak and spiritless, her excitement subsided, but so deeply engrossed in thought that she did not appear to notice his entrance.

He bent over her solicitously. "It was outrageous of that woman to come here and stir you up so, dear! I felt like——"

"*Is there anything in it?—in her suspicion?*" she calmly interrupted him. "Suppose, Sidney, as I am dying, you tell me the truth for once. *Is Georgie Susan's son?*"

Sidney, after just a perceptible instant's pause, answered her: "Of course he's not! I never heard of such a ridiculous idea!"

Laura looked at him for a moment in silence, her gravely meditative eyes making him feel as though his very soul were transparent to her.

"Does Susan know it?" she presently asked.

"Know what? You don't *believe* this insane story?"

"Why did you tell me, the night of our wedding, that the baby's grandfather had told you his mother was dead?"

"Because he *did*! And it was not until we came home from Europe that he came to me and told me she wasn't! That night of the baby's birth he had left her for dying—but she had rallied. Her parents and sisters had then told her that her child had died; and she had believed it. Her father implored me not to let her know the truth—for the family would be disgraced; she herself would be so ruined in the eyes of the community that she would be unable to earn her living; they were poor and needed what she could earn.

"I offered financial help, but he refused it. Of course I consented to keep the secret; I had everything at stake in keeping it; I didn't want to lose you; I didn't want to lose Georgie, I wanted him to inherit White Oak Farm. I wanted to avoid a scandal.

"Then I made the discovery that *she* was teaching the school at White Oak Station! I could not stand for that—she'd see Georgie!—and you'd see *her*! I went to her father and begged him to get her away. I pointed out to him the danger to us all if he didn't. But—well, he died before he accomplished it. And then—Joe married her!"

Laura regarded her husband with a look of utter incredulity. "I've always known, Sidney," she spoke slowly, "that you were weak! But that you were capable of such a thing as this—of leaving that poor woman in ignorance of her own son's existence through all these years! Beguiling me into passing him off as mine when his own unsuspecting mother lived just at my door! What have I been married to? Let me warn you! Never tell

Susan that Georgie is her son, or she'll kill you, Sidney! I would in her place! I would deliberately and cold-bloodedly murder you! How well you've guarded your secret! I never suspected it! Never dreamed of it! Susan herself never dreamed of it—that the boy she was so fond of was her very own—though Eleanor saw the resemblance as soon as she saw them together! Susan whom you seduced and robbed——”

Her voice stopped suddenly, her head fell forward. She was unconscious.

That night her empty, purposeless, utterly futile life came to an end.

CHAPTER XIV

FIVE YEARS LATER

SUSAN, taking up her vigil at Joe's bedside during the small hours of the night, to relieve the trained nurse, was kept feverishly wide awake not only by Joe's laboured, painful respiration, but by the wearisome intensity of her brain's activity; the flood of speculation which overwhelmed her at the possibility of Joe's death, the new life which that possibility opened up to her, her own unprecedented thoughts and desires in this sudden, unlooked-for crisis.

Joe was critically ill with pneumonia.

The doctor, however, gave them a good deal of hope.

Hope? Why did doctors and nurses and acquaintances always assume in cases like this that your "hope" could lie in but one direction?

That word "critically"—it had been on the doctor's and nurse's lips constantly for two days. It beat in Susan's brain unceasingly. Joe was "critically ill." Just what shade of danger (to Joe) did that signify? How much "hope" did it leave to his family? Did "critically ill" mean more or less than "dangerously ill"? So strenuously did she try, in her suspense, to wrest from the word its inmost, finest shade of meaning, that after a while it ceased to mean anything; it became a dead sound.

They had made her send for Josie to come home

from his law school. That looked serious (for Joe). The conventional phrases would persist in her mind, though her deeply ingrained honesty forced her to modify to herself their significance. She was conscious of a mental effort to resist transposing them to mean what it shocked and appalled her to have them mean; to think "hopeful" when she meant (or ought to have meant) "serious", "promising" for "dangerous"!

For nearly seventeen years she had been Joe Houghton's wife; and now perhaps he was dying. Here was she at his bedside, in a chintz-covered arm-chair beside a great old, carved, mahogany four-posted bed in a beautiful and luxurious chamber, watching by a dim light her husband's distorted, unconscious face, her soul on fire with hope (yes, *hope!*) as she had not believed it capable of becoming ever again. If the doctor and nurse could see into her mind and heart, surely they would think it unsafe to leave her alone with their patient!

How her heart had sunk with bitter disappointment when, coming into the sick room a few hours earlier to relieve the nurse and take her place, she had been told, "Your husband is doing much better than I had hoped, Mrs. Houghton; I think, now, that he *may*, perhaps, pull through. But keep a very close watch, and at the least return of his delirium, please call me at once."

"I will," Susan had promised, with an emphasis meant not so much to reassure the nurse as to combat the secret blackness in her heart! It would be only her body, not her soul, that would keep that promise!

"Oh, God, how I want to be *free!*"

The vista opened up before her by that word! She seemed only now to realize what misery her life with Joe had been during all these years! The prospect of release forever from the sound of his complaining,

carping voice, from the sight of his mean little face, from his hated touch——

She would go mad if he got well!

She had not known until now what a living death had been hers—now that escape from its nightmare seemed a possibility.

She was thirty-nine years old; but the bare thought of freedom made her feel like a girl. She was afraid of herself. Afraid of being left alone here in this room with the responsibility on her hands of a life which she did not wish to be saved! Every drop of blood in her body throbbed with longing that he should die! It would be too cruel if, after bringing her to the very brink of freedom like this, he should get well!

“I want him to die!”

The refrain beat in her brain like a hammer. “Oh, God, let him die!”

With utter wonder she contemplated this unsuspected self she was discovering. Was she, perhaps, capable of helping him out? Oh, no, no! Surely no! And yet, was this violent revulsion of feeling at the thought of such a deed really a genuine horror of crime, or merely cowardice?

“What is it that would hold me back when I so much want him to go?” she wondered, feeling bewildered as she recognized what unsounded depths there were in her. “We don’t know ourselves! What does any one really know of his own heart, the true motives under his life? Perhaps it is only the inhibitions of my training that keep me from being a murderer!”

She knew that the degradation of such a marriage as hers had worked in her its insidious poison, in spite of her valiant efforts to hold her soul high above and aloof from her hated relation to Joe.

She thought, “No one has ever cared for him ex-

cept his son. If he had been loved in his childhood and treated with some justice, perhaps he would not have been the man he has been. And if he had married a woman who could have loved him, it might have changed him a little."

Yet so faithfully had she paid the price of her foolish marriage that she doubted whether Joe had ever been aware that, far from caring for him, she had loathed him. No, he had certainly never suspected it. She had concealed her loathing. She had lived a lie.

During the long hours of her vigil at his bedside she thought back over the past five years: of her own increasing isolation from the sort of people she would have liked to make her friends, but from whom her marriage cut her off absolutely; of her ever-growing submission to the will of her husband and his son; of Josie's surprisingly selfish dominance, as he grew older, over both his father and her (the boy really dominated her more than his father had ever done); of the peculiarly tender and confidential friendship which had come to exist between her and Georgie; of Sidney's widowerhood; of the sudden death, from appendicitis, of her only intimate friend, Eleanor Arnold.

Her mind reverted to some incidents which were among the ineffaceable records on her heart. There was one in particular—Sidney's having one day watched for an opportunity when Joe had gone to Middleburg, to come to her and beg her to secure some money from Joe for him.

"But why should I?" She had met his extraordinary request with an astonishment that had deeply shamed and embarrassed him.

"I am so completely out of money," he had pleaded. "And Joe refuses to lend me another dollar!"

"That's not surprising, seeing you are already in

debt to him to the sum of three more years' rent of this place."

"I know it. But he doesn't spend his money himself, nor let you spend it, and what's the good of just hoarding it? He might as well let me have a little. *You* can persuade him to, Susan, if you only will."

"Why should I?"

"Susan! For the sake of what we once were to each other, can't you have a little pity? I'm terribly in need!"

"Did you have pity on me in much greater need?"

"I did not! And haven't I been punished for it?" he had said with such genuine bitterness that she had been startled.

"It's I, not you, that have borne all the penalty of our folly!" she had answered. "It's unbelievable that you should appeal to *me* for help!"

"I've suffered in ways you don't know of!" he had exclaimed, desperately. "Do not dream, Susan, that I have not had to pay for my treatment of you—in ways you cannot imagine. If I had not, it *would* be unbelievable that I should come pleading to you to help me. But I do ask you—I beg you—to get me some help from my brother!"

"I could not even if I wished to."

"Joe worships you; he'd do anything for you. Any man would!"

"Except you! *You* would not even keep your sacred promises to me; you would not save me from disgrace and anguish; you would not make my child legitimate; or be at my side when I was suffering and nearly dying for love of you! *You* to ask help from me!"

"You see me impoverished, stricken! Can't you forgive me, Susan?"

"I wouldn't dream of asking Joe to loan you any

more money. Why don't you get to work, Sidney, and earn your living?"

"If I had not inherited a fortune, I might now be a successful lawyer," Sidney had answered, resentfully. "I had no incentive to work after I was rich. And now it's too late. I'm too old."

"You could dig coal or clean streets. I should think it might be easier for you than begging favours from me."

Then to her horror (horror before the moral deterioration of this man she had once cared for) Sidney had threatened her; threatened to expose all their past history to Joe if she refused to secure money from her husband for her girlhood's lover! Evidently he thought he had a weapon which he could flourish over her head to terrify her! It seemed incredible.

"I've been many kinds of a coward in my time," she had answered him, "but this kind I happen to be incapable of becoming. I'm not afraid of anything that you (or Joe, either) can do to me more than what you have already done. And I shall never ask your brother for a dollar for you. Now do what you please."

Then he had produced his last and what he had considered his weakest card, to force her hand.

"I'm not quite so base as you think me, Susan. It's not for myself that I am humiliating myself like this; it's for my boy. You know that, poor as I have been in the past five years, I have always managed, whatever my own need for money, to save enough out of what Joe has let me have in rent to keep Georgie at school and college. He has not missed one year—you know he hasn't. I'm now for the first time up against it, to pay for this second half year's board and tuition for him. *That's* why I'm asking for help. I tell you I would not ask for myself. It's for my son,

whose inheritance," Sidney miserably admitted, "I've squandered!"

To Sidney's surprise, this plea, which he had considered his weakest, proved to be his only strong one. He had known, of course, that Susan and Georgie were very great friends; but no one of the three, not even Susan herself, had realized how vitally her soul was knit to the soul of Sidney's boy.

"We can't let Georgie's education suffer," she had answered with an anxious concern that had gripped Sidney's heart with mingled pain and relief. "There's not the least use, you know, in my asking Joe to help either you or Georgie. The truth is Joe is dreadfully disappointed that in spite of all your misfortunes and extravagances, you've succeeded in educating Georgie. He hoped you would be driven to putting him to work as *he* was put to work when he was a boy. He wanted Georgie to suffer all the handicaps that he had suffered because of his homelessness in his childhood. No, nothing I could say would move Joe to help us here."

She had pondered the matter earnestly.

"There's one way I might raise some money for Georgie; there's the silver you sent us for a wedding gift. I have never touched it. I can sell it."

Sidney had regarded her doubtfully, a shade of fear in his tired eyes. "Susan! Why are you willing to do for Georgie what you wouldn't do for me?" he had asked in a low voice.

"I love Georgie—he is worth doing things for. You are nothing to me."

The silver had been sold and Joe had never, as yet, missed it. For the past three years she had been dreading, with a shrinking of her very flesh, the violent anger he would vent upon her when the inevitable discovery did take place.

And now perhaps it never would take place. Here

lay Joe before her, more helpless than an infant, and it was possible that never would he rally to pour out upon her his hot rage at her having sold five hundred dollars' worth of silver to help his hated nephew.

She drew a long, deep, almost gasping breath. Would Joe get well and would she have to go on living under that eternal vigilance of her every act, that petty nagging at her for "wasting" her husband's precious substance; that sordid slavery to the material side of life which made existence so hideous! At the thought of it the pent-up misery of years seemed to break its bounds; she bowed her head upon the arm of her chair and tearing sobs shook her. It would be too unbearable—she saw now how unbearable it always had been! She would *not* bear it! If he got well, she would leave him. No matter how he might plead with her! No matter what sort of work she might have to do for a living, she would leave him!

"Susie!"

So faintly her name was spoken, she heard it like a far-away whisper. Her heart stood still. What had the nurse instructed her?—"At the least return of his delirium, call me at once." She must not fail to obey implicitly. Her very soul's salvation hung upon her absolute obedience.

She lifted her head and looked at Joe. His eyes, clear and natural, met hers.

"Susie! Are you cryin' fur *me*?" he whispered; his voice, though feeble, was steady and entirely free from the hoarse raving of the past four days.

Then she need not summon the nurse—he was not "delirious".

He would get well!

"Susie!" came the faint, far-away call.

He was so ill and weak—she must be very kind to

him until he was stronger—as he had always been to her when she had been ill.

When he was quite well again she would go away and leave him forever!

She bent nearer to him and laid her hand softly on his.

“You was cryin’ fur me, Susie?”

She nodded dumbly.

“You’ve made me a good wife, Susie—and you’ve been as good a mother to Josie as you otherwise could be. I want you to pass me your promise, Susie——”

He spoke with difficulty, in halting phrases, his breath rasping, laboured.

“I didn’t expec’ to die as young as what I am—only a little over fifty. What’s fifty? Why, it’s the prime of life yet!—I worked hard and saved and now I got to go and *let* it all! I done it fur Josie. But I never made no will, fur I didn’t think I’d be dyin’ till this good while a’ready!—and it’s too late now fur me to make my will—I ain’t got the strength to fix things like I was a-goin’ to. I’ll have to trust to your promise, Susie, fur to do like what I want you to with my money—fur you’ll get your widow’s third now, *whether* or no. The law’ll give it to you. Now, Susie, I want fur you to promise me you won’t squander it, but save it careful fur Josie and his childern. You won’t need to spend near all the int’rust you’ll draw from your capital; you kin turn back a good bit of your int’rust to be added on to your principal, so’s Josie’ll have more when you die oncet. I want fur Josie to be rich and powerful and grand like what Uncle George was. Pass—me—your promise, Susan,” he spoke with a great effort, “that you won’t spend any of my money on them sisters of yourn. It wouldn’t be right—your squanderin’ *my* money on *your* folks—you kin see fur yourself it wouldn’t. What’s mine had ought all to go to

Josie. Ain't so? I earnt and saved a lot of it—all but what Uncle George inherited to me and I near doubled *that*. And Josie's to have all. You kin live on a wery little of your int'rust, Susan," he insisted, struggling desperately with his weakness. "Promise you will!"

"Trust me, Joe, to do what is right for Josie."

"I know you will—you was always a good mother to him. But I have so afraid you'll want to spend on them sisters! *Don't forget!* What you don't have to use *is for Josie!*" he reiterated with all the force his failing strength could gather.

"What I don't have to use—yes, I understand," she reassured him.

"And you ain't to will it to any one but Josie! Promise!"

"I am not to will it to any one but Josie."

"I couldn't rest in my grave if you did! If I'd foreseen I was a-goin' to die, I'd of *fixed* things! And now I can't no more!"

"Josie shall have everything that by rights is his, Joe," Susan comforted him.

"Call Josie! I'm a-goin' fast!"

She rose quickly to summon both the nurse and her step-son.

Joe waved away the nurse. "Don't *you* come takin' up my time—it's too short! I want my son and my wife! Josie!"

His son, sincerely grieved, bent over him, pale and tearful.

"Your mother's gave me her promise, Josie, that she'll will you her widow's third of my estate and that she'll save back fur you all she kin of her int'rust. She's passed me her promise—you hold her to it!"

"If she has promised, Father," said Josie, soothingly, "you don't need to worry. I won't have to hold her to it. Mother'll keep her promise."

Susan vaguely reflected how subtle Josie always was when it was a question of protecting his own interests; his challenging her honour, just now, to keep that questionable promise she had equivocally made!—a promise capable of such varied interpretation!

"You'll know how to take care of your rights, ain't, Josie?" his father breathed, his ruling passion strong in death. "Don't leave Susan give away nothing to her sisters that's by rights *yourn!* Ain't, you won't?"

"She wouldn't want to, Father. There, there, don't worry about it; everything will be as you wish it to be; I promise you!"

"Susan would be a spendthrift if you left her be!" his father warned him.

"She has promised you, Father—that's enough."

Joe breathed a long sigh of utter exhaustion. "Leave me rest now," he murmured.

His eyes closed, his head sank deeper into the pillow.

It seemed but a few moments later, as they stood grouped about him, the nurse a little apart, when his wheezy breathing stopped suddenly. His jaw fell open.

The nurse came forward. "It's all over!" she whispered with conventional solemnity.

It was not until the nurse had, with professional mournfulness, drawn the sheet over Joe's stiffened face, and Susan felt Josie, at her side, shudder and tremble, that she could believe it.

Joe was dead!

She couldn't grasp it. A cold terror gripped her lest it was only a dream; lest she presently awake to find him still nagging, spying, carping, sulking, holding tight his purse strings.

Joe was dead!

Yet as she went forth from the presence of the dead she was conscious of a great pity for the man she was forever leaving, pity because she, his wife, should be feeling just now not grief, but only a boundless peace and contentment; like one who, having for seventeen years been bound and gagged, had now suddenly struck off her bonds.

But Josie, walking after her, felt a new responsibility upon his shoulders—the responsibility of seeing to it that his father's dying wish be fulfilled. He had been constituted his mother's keeper. He would faithfully execute his trust.

Josie had never been told that Susan was not his own mother.

CHAPTER XV

A WIDOW

JOSIE was shocked and even hurt at the irresponsible gayety with which his mother bore her bereavement.

He thought with bitterness, "All she cares about, I guess, is that now she'll have some money of her own to spend—*my* money!"

For of course every dollar his mother spent would take off just that much from *his* ultimate inheritance. He was worried. He knew that his father had never allowed her any freedom in spending money—women were such spendthrifts! And here she was now, suddenly turned loose with absolute right (except for the restraint of that death-bed promise) over a great fortune! He could conceive of no other explanation of her unaccustomed brightness and joy. For though an intelligent youth, his perceptions were keen rather than fine; he lacked the sensitiveness which feels atmospheres and another's point of view.

It was a singular fact that Josie, though a graduate of a first-class college where he had really seen life, had never seemed to become aware of his father's extreme crudity. His familiarity with it, together with his genuine affection for his father, had mercifully kept him from seeing Joe as others saw him. Thanks to the unselfish tact with which Susan had always maintained domestic peace, he had never realized the tragic incompatibility between his parents. Hence his complete mystification at

Susan's present offensive attitude; offensive, that is, to him.

Her refusal to wear black had outraged his middle-class sense of propriety; but her lack of even a pretence of a decently sorrowful demeanour—in public before their very neighbours!—made him more deeply ashamed of her than he had ever in his life been of his father.

"Didn't you care for Father at *all*, Mother?" he one day broke out after witnessing the gay encounter between Susan and Georgie, who had run over to the big house to greet her five minutes after his arrival at the cottage for the Christmas holidays.

Susan's radiant face grew sober at the question. She looked at Josie uncertainly. She would never be able to make him understand. She never had made him understand anything in her heart; while Georgie seemed to realize, without being told, everything about her. *He* knew what a release was hers; what a chattel she had been; though she had never talked to him of herself.

How should she answer her step-son? Wasn't it better to be done with pretence and speak the truth, even if it were not understood?

"Try to think a bit, Josie—how could a woman like me have cared for a man like your father? Your father was so far beneath me that he could not hear the sound of my voice when I spoke!"

Susan felt herself tingle with a strange delight in speaking out at last the truth from her heart.

"That's a fine way for you to talk to me of my own father! For a wife to talk of her husband just dead a month! Father loved *you*!"

"I know he did, so he had the better of it, you see, for I never let him see how much I *didn't* love *him*."

"Why did you marry a man you considered so far beneath you? If you ever *were* so far above Father,

as you seem to think yourself, you certainly must admit that you sank to his level by marrying him! Why did you do it?"

"One of the strongest reasons was——"

She almost said, "My longing to mother you!"

She checked herself in time. Not yet was she ready to tell him she was not his own mother. She knew instinctively that however much recreation Josie found in bullying her he did truly love her so much that the discovery that he was not hers would deal him a blow far deeper than that which his father's sudden death had given him.

"I can only tell you this, Josie—my reasons were unselfish. I have paid dear for the lesson that a woman had better cut her throat than marry a man she—despises." She used the word deliberately. It was such joy to call a spade a spade! "All the same, Josie, I am sure that my marriage harmed no one but myself; and did a few people some good, perhaps. But the past seems such an awful nightmare to me that I don't want to speak of it, to think of it, any more! Only—it may as well be understood between you and me that your father's death is to me a blessed release! Now let us forever drop the subject!"

Josie had always been intensely jealous of Georgie, not only as the rival heir to White Oak Farm, but because of the good comradeship that existed between his mother and his cousin. His mother was *his* exclusive possession, and no other boy had a right to any least part of her consideration. He hotly resented every friendly look or word that passed between them.

A third cause of his jealousy was Georgie's superior talents. He was already, at the age of nineteen, in the graduating class of a school of civil engineers and

had manifested precocious and distinguished ability. His professors predicted that he would some day do something very big.

There were times when Susan saw, to her sorrow, that Josie's aversion to Georgie almost equalled the venom his father had always felt for Sidney.

Joe had died at the end of November, and it was the following spring, while Josie was home from his law school for the Easter vacation, that the first real conflict between him and his mother occurred.

The habit of *not* spending money had become so fixed with Susan that when informed by her deceased husband's lawyer that she possessed three hundred thousand dollars, with no strings attached to it, to spend it and will it away as she liked, the fact left her rather uncomprehending. She was still vaguely under the spell of her husband's last injunctions, enjoining her to remember that she held his money only in trust for his son, the real heir, and that she must be most conscientiously economical.

So, upon Josie's return home at Easter, he was relieved to find no change in the old order of their life; no extra servants, no extravagant clothes, no new car.

Evidently she was taking her promises to his dying father very seriously. He had not really expected her to do otherwise; yet he found himself feeling greatly relieved.

But when, after the habit of his father, he prowled about the house to catch her up, perhaps, in some secret sin, he discovered in her bedroom—not hidden, but brazenly displayed in a new bookcase—several dozens of new, expensive volumes, poetry, essays, travels, fiction, economics, philosophy, he felt greatly annoyed. She had never bought books while his father lived; why should she find it necessary now?

"You could get enough books to satisfy any

reasonable person at the Middleburg library, I should think, Mother. I don't see why you have to squander good money on books. It's certainly not being very economical with my money!"

How like old times it sounded to Susan!—except that it was couched in grammatical English. For four restful, heavenly months her ears had not once been rasped with the menace of that hateful word, "economical". Was it only a lovely dream? Was Josie going to take his father's place and nag at her, hamper her at every turn? She had so revelled in the luxury of buying books quite recklessly, for the first time in her life! It had been her only orgy since her freedom, except—

Must Josie be told just how she used every dollar of the money which the family lawyer was paying over to her? He was quite as penurious as his father had been—was she, then, going to have to account to him for every least little indulgence?

She did not even question his *ipse dixit*, "My money." Joe's money was of course his son's. When every now and then during his vacation a question of her expenditures came up, she always accepted quite placidly and as a matter of course his ultimatum, "That would be an unnecessary expense. I can't consent to it."

She told him that it was so lonely at White Oak Farm when he was away, and that the place involved so much more household work than seemed worth while for one person, that she thought it might be an economy of labour (as well as of coal) for them to take an apartment in Middleburg and sublet White Oak Farm.

But Josie would not consider it. Inasmuch as a desirable tenant could not readily be found, it was much more economical for them to remain on the farm.

"Especially as we don't have to pay Uncle Sidney nearly as much rent as we would have to pay for an apartment—seeing he still owes the estate money. What's more, it is only by living out here at White Oak Farm that we shall ever get out of Uncle Sidney the money he owes us."

"But we don't need to get it back, Josie; we've plenty to be comfortable with; so why sacrifice ourselves for a house—or a debt?"

"You've no business sense, Mother," was Josie's conclusive reply. "I would not consider moving away from here."

But it was not only in the matter of her use of money that Josie tyrannized. Georgie, too, was home just now for the Easter vacation; and during the whole two weeks of the two boys' sojourn at the farm Susan was never free for an hour from her sense of Josie's incessant spying upon her to intercept a tête-à-tête between her and Georgie.

She observed that this seemed to trouble Georgie very little. He had a way (most irritating to Josie) of ignoring the latter's slights, because the obvious fact was that he minded them no more than he would have minded the snarling of a cur. But the crowning offence to Josie, which made him almost hysterical with anger, was the utter failure of his own inimical attitude toward his cousin to put any restraint whatever upon the spontaneity of Georgie's intercourse with his "Aunt Susan".

"Any one would suppose you were more his mother than mine!" Josie would complain to Susan, like a jealous child. "What right has he coming round here to monopolize you, Mother? I'm only here for two weeks and I want you to myself a *little* bit! He's always hanging 'round here as if the place were already his—and as if you were his!"

Susan had long since, in sheer self-defence, fallen

into the way of curbing any expression of affection for Georgie when Josie was by.

"Why can't he stay at home with his father? I haven't any father! I haven't any one but you. And he, who has a father, wants my mother as well, so that I'll have no one!"

Josie, who in some respects would never be a grown man, seemed to regard his orphaned condition as a claim to such honorable martyrdom as to entitle him to unlimited sympathy, indulgence, petting; just as, in his childhood, he had made large capital of his little illnesses, prolonging his convalescence and its attendant relaxation of discipline as long as he possibly could.

"Do you realize, Mother," Josie pursued the discussion, "that if Uncle Sidney should die (and he's miserable enough to die any old time) my cousin George could turn you and me off this place?"

"Yes, Josie."

"If he has any honour about him he won't repudiate his father's debts to my father!" Josie hotly maintained. "He'll let us live on here until the last dollar of that debt is wiped out!"

"I don't see why George should burden his young life with his father's debts, my dear."

"Oh, you don't, don't you? Do you realize that if Uncle Sidney does not pay back what he borrowed from Father, *I'm* the loser? You'd take from me, your own son, and give to a boy that's no relation to you!"

"Georgie has lost enough through his father—without assuming his debts!"

"All your sympathy is for Georgie, of course! Why don't you give *me* some sympathy for all I'd lose? A pretty mother you are, I must say!"

"It isn't as though you needed this place; you'll have so much more than you will need!—more than

any one ought to have! The whole scheme seems horribly wrong to me. You two young men have no social right to great wealth for which you have not worked—you nearly a million dollars and Georgie this great estate! It ought not to be allowed. Something ought to be done about it!”

“You know perfectly well there’s no use your talking that kind of rot to me, Mother!”

“Yes, I do know that perfectly well, Josie, dear!” Susan sighed. “More’s the pity!”

Josie just here experienced one of his sudden revulsions to demonstrative affection. “You’re *my* little mother, so you are!” he exclaimed, rushing at her and burying his head on her bosom, kissing her roughly, rapturously, fondling her, insisting upon her fondling him, cooing over her incoherent love phrases.

She submitted, half appeased, half bored, marvelling at the boy’s morbid nature, responding as warmly as she could.

Ever since Joe’s death Susan had rioted in the delight, so long denied her, of doing little kindnesses for her aging sisters. She did not dream of using Joe’s money in any large expenditures for them, but she constantly carried dainties to them, bought them trifling gifts, took them driving in her little car, insisted upon getting their laundry every week and having it done at White Oak Farm by her laundress, called for them every Sunday and took them out to her home to dinner.

It was this latter item which precipitated a discussion between her and Josie that led to far-reaching results.

“It seems to me you go gadding an awful lot, Mother,” Josie grumbled when on Sunday morning she announced her intention of driving over to Reifs-

ville. "You didn't squander gasoline so recklessly while Father lived!"

"The word gasoline, Josie, will ever bring up to me bright and tender memories of your father!"

"Your sarcasm doesn't cover your taking advantage!"

"Of whom?"

"Of poor Father—who you say you did not love!" he irrelevantly accused her.

"*Whom* you did not love—not *who*," she automatically corrected him—then laughed at herself involuntarily, and so merrily that Josie, whose heart still mourned, winced perceptibly.

"What do you want to go to Reifsville for?" he inquired. "You were there just the other day."

"I'm going to bring your aunts over to dine with us."

"Huh! You've been doing that a lot, I guess, while I've been away—since Father's gone! You didn't do it when he was living."

"Do you think that's to his credit—that I did not invite my sisters here while he lived?"

"Don't fling gibes at my father, Mother! I won't stand for it!"

"'Fling gibes.' It sounds Shakspearean! 'Whips and arrows of outrageous fortune'—come, dear boy, *please* don't be an ass!"

"'An ass!' I never hear you call George an ass!"

"Josie, aren't you ever going to grow out of your infancy?" she asked with a long-drawn breath as she turned away and left him.

This tilt with Josie rankled in her heart all the way over to Reifsville, preparing a fertile soil for the comments which her sisters let drop, from time to time, on the ride back. The Reifsville school would close in a month, they told Susan, and they would miss the needed board money which the teacher paid

them, though they would be glad to be relieved of the extra work he made, even though a man teacher wasn't nearly so much trouble as a woman teacher had always been. They hoped they could get one or two summer boarders, if they could stand the work it would entail—they were not so strong as they used to be—they were really getting to be old women, now, "funny" as it seemed! And yet, how they were going to live at all without taking summer boarders as they had been doing for the past few years——

"I have so glad for you, Susie, that you'll never have to worry about money in your old age, nor have to work beyond your strength. Joe's left you that well-fixed, you can take it easy; ain't? It's a good thing he died too soon to get a will made a'ready, or mebby he'd of tied up his money so's you couldn't of had no freedom with it. But now that the law has gave you your widow's thirds, to do what you please with, you're *well-fixed*. Ain't?"

"To do what I please with?"

"Why, to be sure! You can even will it away from Josie if you want."

"Do you mind, Susie," asked Addie, "how oncet you was a-goin' to leave Joe and run off? *Ain't*, it's a good thing, now, you stuck! Look how nice-fixed you are—and a widdah and all!—and your own boss."

"My 'own boss'!" repeated Susan, vaguely.

"The *County Gazette* says you are got an income of more than eighteen thousand dollars a year, Susan! Yi, yi, it wonders me! Is it *so*, Susie?"

"I—I—suppose it is. Yes, I really do have that income. Dear me! I had not realized it, Addie! I've thought of it as really belonging to Josie. Of course by rights it is Josie's."

"Josie's nothin'!" exclaimed Lizzie. "Sure you

earnt everything Joe Houghton inherited to you, Susie!—the way you worked fur him when he could of hired for you; and you so good-educated and not used to hard work! And the way you brang up his son for him! That boy would not be the mannerly, genteel young man he *kin* be (when he wants to) if it hadn't of been for you, Susie. Yes, indeedy, you earnt all you got!"

"Well, I guess anyhow!" Addie corroborated this statement. "Don't you go thinkin' it ain't every cent of it yourn, Susie, to do what you like with!"

"Please don't speak of it before Josie," Susan warned them, hastily, as they drew up under the porte-cochère at White Oak Farm.

Josie's manner to his aunts that day aped so perfectly the inhospitable attitude his father had always taken toward them on their very occasional visits to White Oak Farm—the curtness with which Joe had been wont to answer their friendly or propitiatory overtures; his sullen and prolonged silences; his actual rudeness—that Susan was conscious of a shade of amusement conflicting with her mingled indignation and sorrow. She and her sisters had been, for the past four months, so greatly enjoying their restful, happy Sundays together, freed from Joe's kill-joy presence, that they all felt keenly this return to the old wretched atmosphere.

While the painfully embarrassing dinner was in progress Susan thought back over the unfailing kindnesses and generosity of her sisters to her stepson, through all his childhood and youth; of how he used to love to be taken to the Reifsville cottage for the animal cookies the "aunties" would bake for him; the "sticker" baskets they would patiently construct for him, and the chicken-coops and pigpens they would build out of clothes pins; the little birthday and Christmas feasts and gifts they always

managed to have for him, no matter how poor they found themselves.

How could Josie feel toward them, now, as he seemed to?

"Ain't these here oranges sweet, though?" Lizzie remarked as she tasted the "fruit hash" they had for dessert. "It gives an awful good taste. I have so fond for oranges and we don't never buy none no more—me and Addie—they come too high. They want eighty cents a dozen now, on the store, for oranges. Ain't, Addie?"

"Yes, anyhow!" said Addie.

"We get them for nothing," began Susan, "from Joe's Florida orange grove. We get——"

Josie interrupted her. "For nothing! I don't call it for nothing! We have to pay the freight, don't we? And the taxes and the labour, don't we? For nothing! That's just like a woman!"

"We've got so many more than we can use," said Susan, "you must take a basket full home with you, Lizzie."

"We haven't more than we can use!" Josie quickly contradicted her. "You can make me a lot of orange marmalade, Mother. You know how I love orange marmalade."

"I've already made you all the orange marmalade you can eat in a year, Josie."

"Well, we can find plenty of use for all the oranges we have," he persisted.

"You mustn't give us what you can't spare, Susie," Lizzie protested, flushing sensitively.

"Of course I can spare them. We have two big boxes of them in the storage room."

Josie, looking annoyed and offended, frowned into his coffee cup. But he said no more.

After dinner he neither left the women to themselves nor did he join them as they sat about the log

fire in the parlour; but settling himself unsociably at the extreme other end of the room, he buried himself in a book.

The constraint which his inimical presence put upon their conversation, and the chilled atmosphere it created, drove Lizzie and Addie to make an early start for home.

At the first suggestion of their departure Josie laid down his book and sauntered toward them.

"You're going to catch the four o'clock trolley?" he asked as they rose to don their Mennonite black hoods and shawls.

Susan had gone to the storeroom to get the oranges.

"Why—we—Susie generally fetches us in her automobile—but——"

"It seems hardly worth while to bother taking out the automobile when the trolley is so handy," said Josie.

"We'll have the heavy basket of oranges, though," said Lizzie, hesitatingly, reluctant to lose their always greatly enjoyed ride with Susan.

"But I've had Mother to myself so little this vacation! I'd rather she didn't go away over to Reifsville this afternoon and leave me here all alone!" objected Josie, plaintively.

"Why, have you got the stomachache or whatever, Josie?" inquired Addie, solicitously.

"Don't you think I want my mother to myself sometimes? Georgie's had her this vacation nearly as much as I've had her!"

Lizzie and Addie exchanged hasty, scared glances.

"And," continued Josie, "gasoline's gone up so, and there's the toll both ways between Reifsville and White Oak Station. Do you know what a trip to Reifsville really costs in toll and gas and wear and tear on your car? It averages twelve cents a mile! Fact!

Much more expensive, you see, than to go by trolley or train."

"But, you see, Josie, me and Addie, us we couldn't afford to visit our Susie if she didn't fetch and take us; for we couldn't afford the twenty-five cents trolley fare."

"Then Mother would better give you the trolley fare; it would be much cheaper for her. I'm thinking of selling our car, anyhow."

The sisters, without replying, continued to bundle up in their hoods and shawls and overshoes.

But Susan, upon returning to the parlour, refused to consider letting them go home by trolley.

"We all enjoy the automobile ride," she said. "And there's this heavy basket."

"Heavy! I should say it is heavy!" exclaimed Josie as he lifted it tentatively and set it down again. "What on earth have you got in it?"

"All it will hold of the good things your aunts are fond of," Susan briefly answered.

"Make the load lighter so they *can* carry it. I don't want you to take the car so far again to-day, Mother."

"Please carry the basket out to the car for us, Josie," Susan coldly requested him.

"But, Mother, I don't want the car used so hard! You use it much too hard. Aunties can just as well take the trolley home, and——"

"Carry the basket out for me, please," she cut him short.

Josie obeyed so ungraciously that the sisters looked mortified and worried, and Susan's face took on the weary, drawn expression that it had quite lost during the past four months.

No reference was made, during the ride over to Reifsville, to the unpleasantnesses of the visit, though the sisters were sad at heart in realizing afresh how

"mean-dispositioned" Susan's step-son was and how unappreciative and ungrateful he seemed for all she had always been to him.

On the way back Susan drove slowly to give herself time to think. And her thinking covered a considerable area, ranging from the vague, only half-realized "promises" (if such they had really been) with which she had tried to comfort Joe's last moments on earth, to the chance words her sisters had dropped that morning—"The law has given you your widow's thirds *to do what you please with.*" "An income of over eighteen thousand dollars a year." "You surely *earned* everything Joe left you!"

That was the crux of the whole matter! Was she, indeed, by virtue of her seventeen years of service in Joe's interests, morally entitled, as she was legally, to full freedom in the use and disposal of her "widow's third" of her husband's estate? Legally she owed no accounting to Josie or any one else—

There was no question in her mind of her being bound by her last words to her husband; she had spoken them only to soothe him and had not realized their full significance. She did not feel herself held by them in the least. She was not at all sure that she had really made any definite promises.

"But even if I did and had meant them, a bad promise is better broken than kept."

The only possible question she had to decide was the extent of Josie's moral right over the property that had been his father's.

She remembered that Sidney had once told her that if he had not inherited his uncle's fortune, but had had to work for his living, he might not have been the wreck he was.

"Why, even if I didn't want this money (and God knows I do!) I would be doing the worst possible

harm to Josie by saving it for him—pampering his horrible selfishness and stinginess! The best service I can do him is to *spend it up!* ”

In a flash she began to see what the command of such an income might mean to her. And suddenly she gave herself over to lovely dreams of all the things she could do with it. The first thing she would want to do would be to buy Georgie the new suit he so badly needed and some chemicals and tools he had told her he lacked for carrying out a daring experiment he had in his head.

The next thing she would love to do would be to settle a comfortable income—a very comfortable one—upon her sisters. Oh, heavenly joy! What a lovely thing money could be! To be able to tell Addie and Lizzie that never more need their “declining years” be fretted and harassed with anxious cares about the wherewithal to live, never more need they labour beyond their strength or be worried with boarders or frightened at the expense of illness or the creeping ravages of old age.

After that, she would like to buy a really good automobile; she mentally apologized to her faithful little old car which had so often carried her far away from the strained and cramping atmosphere of her home, out into the fresh air and sunshine, and had recreated her.

Next thing, how she would dearly love to go to some fearfully expensive New York shops and buy some real clothes!

By the time she reached home, the weary, care-worn countenance with which she had started out was replaced by a radiance which made her look so very girlish that Josie, coming into the hall to greet her, prepared with a recitation of his several reasons for being highly offended with her, was startled and surprised.

In a moment, however, he recovered his sense of wrong at her hands, with several points added to the score. What right had she coming in like a breeze, with rosy cheeks and smiling lips and sparkling eyes, looking so provokingly kissable?—when all day long she had been going against his wishes, neglecting him, her fatherless son, giving her time and his substance to outsiders.

He had expected her to return to him apologetic, remorseful, troubled, anxious to propitiate him! And just look at her!

He began at once to reproach her for that huge basketful of food that had been given away.

“You never gave away our provisions like that when Father lived, so why should you do it now, Mother? You wouldn’t even tell me what was in that basket. Goodness knows what mightn’t have been in it! What *was* in it?”

“Josie, darling, will you kindly mind your own business?” she gaily retorted, to his utter consternation, tripping up the wide, winding staircase as lightly as a child.

The next moment he heard her bedroom door close with a snap.

He stood dumbfounded. *She* was offended with *him*! After the way she had treated him all day! What had *she* to be offended about, he’d like to know!

Never, from his babyhood up, had he been able to endure having her offended with him.

He set his lips tight, walked firmly upstairs to her bedroom door, and rapped peremptorily.

CHAPTER XVI

SUSAN REALIZES HER FREEDOM

SHE was propped up on a couch in a deep bay window, reading a novel.

Josie jerked a chair to the side of the couch and sat down, facing her.

"Mother!" he demanded, his voice unsteady, actual tears in his eyes, "don't you love *me* any better than you loved Father?"

"When you are lovable, Josie, I love you," she answered gently, drawing his hand into hers.

"You call it being 'unlovable,' I suppose, when I object to your doing what you would not do if Father were alive!"

"I'm not such an idiot as to let my life be hampered and thwarted and dwarfed by the will of a dead man! It was bad enough to have to submit to the will of a live one!"

"You can't mean that you don't intend to keep the promises you made to Father when he was dying!" exclaimed Josie, both shocked and alarmed; for if he could not hold over her the solemn obligations of those death-bed promises, how could he ever restrain her reckless inclinations to give away the money that ought to be hoarded for him?

"I'm not sure I made him any promises," she answered, indifferently. "I said anything, at the moment, that I thought would soothe and comfort him. I would have promised to fly to Mars if he had asked me to. I'd promise *any* dying person

anything at all that I knew would please them. But my life is my own now, thank God! It's no longer Joe Houghton's to use and crush and distort!—as it was for seventeen years!"

Josie looked white and shaken. "Well, then, if you have no respect for a solemn promise given to the dying, will you at least have enough regard for *my interests* to restrain your inclination to shower all sorts of luxuries upon Aunt Addie and Aunt Lizzie—luxuries that they were never used to!"

"Josie, my son, do you really think it 'nobler in the mind' to be mean and stingy to two dear and very poor old women who were always kindness itself to you, than to break a hideous promise given to a man whose last dying thoughts were of greed and self? Do you?"

"If you restricted yourself to giving them a few necessities, I might put up with it. But I'm just afraid that next thing you'll be helping them with *money*, and——"

"How well you know me, Josie!" she smiled, patting his hand.

"You wouldn't go so far as that, of course—with my money?"

"Certainly not—with your money."

"Well, all you have is practically mine and will some day be really mine."

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?" he quickly demanded, a catch in his voice.

"My fortune is not entailed to you."

"But as it came from my father and his family and not through you or your family, it's certainly morally mine and not yours to will to any one but me. You know what Father would wish——"

"By the way, Josie, as I told you the other day, this place is too big and lonesome for me when you

are away and I don't want to stay here. I don't want to be burdened with the care of this great house. I want to take an apartment in Middleburg for a while——"

"I told you the other day, Mother, I would not consider that. It would be so uselessly extravagant. A sheer waste of money."

"I'm not asking you to consider it, Josie."

"Then why waste words discussing it when we are not really to consider it?"

"I said I was not asking *you* to consider it."

"Of course you're not—because you know it would be perfectly useless."

"Yes. Quite useless."

"Then let's drop it. Here we stay."

"But I am considering it. Or rather, I have already decided to move to town."

"But I tell you I won't consent——"

"Don't get excited, son. Your consent is not in the least necessary. I intend to be free of this house—free to run to New York or Boston or Florida or California, or perhaps to Europe——" She laughed out at Josie's look of helpless horror. "You can go with me sometimes if you like."

"You shan't do it! You shan't squander my money!"

"To-morrow morning, Josie, I am going to our Middleburg lawyer to arrange for settling a good income upon my sisters. A very comfortable income. That will eliminate, once and for all, any argument between you and me about *them*."

Josie stared at her wildly. "You shan't! You dare not! What right have you?"

"The same right that you have to dispose of your inheritance as you please. And you must understand from now on, Josie, that I don't intend to permit you to nag at me, to question anything I may

choose to do *with my own*. It is impertinent, and I won't tolerate it. Another thing, you will not only be courteous to my sisters when they come here, you will make them welcome."

"I won't!" he snapped back like a spiteful child. "You can't make me!"

"Then you and I can't live together, Josie," she answered, dropping his hand and picking up her novel.

"Can't live together!" he breathed, appalled at this new mother whom he did not recognize.

"Next thing," he said, chokingly, "you'll be handing out our money to Georgie!—to tide him over until he takes possession of White Oak Farm!"

"If I did, it would be my money, not yours. Remember—I will suffer no interference from you, my dear. I'm only just beginning to bring you up as you ought to be brought up."

"And I suppose you won't even promise to make your will in my favour!"

"Of course I won't promise. I shall wait to see, first, how you behave. I'm inclined to think it would be far better for your soul, Josie, if I should sink my fortune in the sea rather than give it to you! So don't forget—from this day on, so long as I live, you are on trial for good behaviour."

Josie sprang up, his face distorted with rage. "You don't love me any better than you loved Father! You hate me! You're my worst enemy! You——"

It was like the old tantrums of his childhood, which his father had never allowed her to punish or discipline. Susan shrank away from him in distress, as from an abnormality.

But in the midst of his raving there was a knock at her bedroom door and, to her great relief, the entrance of a maid put a sudden stop to the young man's tirade.

"Mr. Sidney Houghton," the maid announced.

"Tell him, please, that I am lying down and wish to be excused," said Susan, instantly.

Sidney had been trying for the past month to secure a repeatedly refused interview with her.

"He says to tell you, Missus, that it's some important and he's got to see you," the girl replied.

"Josie, will you go down and ask him what he wants?" Susan asked.

Without replying, Josie flung himself out of the room and banged the door behind him, the maid following him with a grin.

Susan picked up her novel; but she could not put her mind upon it and soon laid it aside again.

For the past four weeks, with a blind, unthinking instinct of self-defence, she had been warding off an interview with Sidney which he, with a persistency and determination that vaguely alarmed her, had been seeking. She was sure he could not possibly have anything to say to her which she would wish to hear.

During Joe's lifetime, her occasionally meeting him had come to mean little more to her than encountering any chance acquaintance. But his attitude since her widowhood had been so gallant, yet so fearful; so insinuating, yet so apologetic, that it had assumed to her imagination the expression of a menace, threatening her newly acquired freedom, her peace of mind; so that it had become, of late, intensely disagreeable to her to be forced to speak with him. That was one reason why she wished to go to Middleburg to live—to avoid the constant chance of an encounter with him.

"Would he have the amazing effrontery to ask me to marry him?" she wondered; for she intuitively sensed, unmistakably, a would-be lover in his manner. "Does he think, actually, that he has anything

at all to offer *any* woman—let alone me whose whole life he spoiled?”

Could it be that, shattered wreck of a man as he was, he considered merely being a Houghton was a sufficient offset to his disadvantages? Did he still look down upon her from a superior height as his discarded and repudiated “mistress” and believe that he would be stooping to marry her?

“He’s quite capable of thinking like that!” she decided. “While *I* feel that my one only consolation for never having had a living child is that it would have been a Houghton!—would have had to fight that bad inheritance!”

It was almost funny, how different the point of view of two people could be!

Meantime, Josie was, with much relish, curtly telling his Uncle Sidney that his mother declined to see him, and enjoying viciously his uncle’s evident chagrin and disappointment.

Josie noticed, casually, the shabby finery of his impoverished uncle—how sprucely he was attired in the worn and out-of-date clothing of his “better days,” how cleanly he was shaven, how shining were his patched shoes; he noticed, too, the cane and gloves which he carried; a cane and gloves to walk across the lawn in the country! Wasn’t that like Uncle Sidney?

An idea flashed upon Josie that made his heart leap into his throat. He looked into his uncle’s face—a tired, disappointed, prematurely old face which, however, seemed lit up, just now, with a sparkle of hope, like that of the proverbial drowning man who reaches for a plank.

Did Uncle Sidney actually have the nerve, the utter audacity, to come here trying to defraud him, Josie, out of part of his rightful inheritance, through courting his mother?—after having squandered a

much larger fortune of his own! Would she be silly enough to get sentimental about him?—he was still handsome and elegant and well-mannered and all those things that women love a man to be. Josie himself had always secretly admired and been proud of his dandified relative.

He would have to warn his mother! Uncle Sidney would simply run through with all the money he could get his hands on.

“And then Mother’d be on *my* hands for support! After having given that self-indulgent spendthrift my father’s savings!”

He would warn her at once!

But would she heed his warning? She had told him to mind his business and not to nag or criticize!

Well, then, he’d use some guile. He’d plot to circumvent such a disaster to both himself and his mother.

It was jealousy, now, as well as greed, that moved him.

“Mother told me to ask you what you wanted,” he accosted his uncle in a tone as insolent as he could make it.

“I want to see her.”

“What for?”

“I’ll tell *her* that.”

“She’s lying down and doesn’t wish to be disturbed. You can tell me your errand.”

“Tell her, please, that I shall be over again this evening when she’s *not* lying down. I *must* see *her*—on a matter of importance—of vital importance.”

“Of vital importance to you perhaps, but not to her!” retorted Josie, eyeing his uncle with a knowing look which was meant to convey to him that his astute nephew saw straight through his shallow scheme for rehabilitating his fortunes at the expense

of his sister-in-law and his nephew. "She can't see you this evening. She and I have an engagement."

As Sidney Houghton made his crestfallen way back to his cottage, after this rebuff at the big house, he weighed and considered the only path yet left open to him by which he might once more become possessed of comfort and even happiness; for he was still young; and Susan, who had marvellously carried her years, was even more alluring as a blooming, full-fledged woman of thirty-nine than she had been as a young girl.

Would she spurn him so relentlessly once she knew the secret which, during more than eighteen years, he had guarded so zealously; with so much anguish of suspense and fear?

"When she learns that Georgie is *our son*—hers and mine—she'll surely see there's only one way to make things right for him. Josie need never know. No one need ever know except Susan and me."

His uncertainty as to how Susan would receive his disclosure; whether she would, as Laura had warned him, passionately resent her defrauded motherhood and his long years of deception; or whether she would be glad that at least her "respectability" had been saved, as well as that of her son—

Sidney's heart failed him when he contemplated going to her with his confession.

But what else was there to do? If he could see the least chance of winning her without it—

But far from letting him come courting her, she would not even receive a business call from him.

Would he have to tell her in writing? He did not like to risk that. Suppose his letter should fall into Josie's hands? That detestable little cad was quite capable of opening Susan's letters if he had the least suspicion (as he manifestly had) of anything

impending which might menace *his* fortunes! No, he could not risk a letter.

But if Susan persisted in avoiding him, refusing to receive him?

He suddenly saw a possible, though doubtful, way out. He could confess to Georgie the story of his birth and let *him* tell his mother. Then when Susan had had time to recover from the shock, he himself would go to her and suggest that together they make amends to their son in the only possible way.

How would Georgie himself take it? Georgie was the one creature in the world that Sidney had always loved better than he loved himself. And the boy was devoted to him; the only human being left to him in the world who did care whether he lived or died; whether he was provided with life's bare necessities, or whether he starved or froze to death! To risk turning Georgie's affection to resentment and bitterness? The boy was so quixotically honourable and chivalrous! And so extraordinarily fond of Susan!

"It's a devil of a mess, any way you look at it!" he sighed.

But he finally concluded that he would take Georgie into his confidence.

It was at this self-same hour, while Sidney was slowly and thoughtfully returning to his humble home, foiled for the twentieth time in his purpose to try out his fortunes with Susan, that a discussion between Susan's sisters at Reifsville was threatening to take the matter somewhat out of his hands.

"Even if we don't tell her now," Lizzie was saying as she and Addie sat together over a cup of tea in their spotless kitchen, "I know I'll have to tell her till I come to die oncet, Addie. I could never go be-

fore my Gawd with that there sekert on my conscience!"

"Me, neither," agreed Addie, who had never in her life been known to disagree with Lizzie.

"Georgie's so much nicer a young man than what Josie is and Susie she has so fond for Georgie," continued Lizzie.

"Yes, fonder yet than what she has for Josie, it seems; ain't?"

"Yes, and no wonder! Josie's certainly awful ugly dispositioned that way!"

"And for a young man he seems so silly!" said Addie. "More like a girl."

"Yes, ain't? I don't see how our Susie stands him so good as what she does! I could stand him pretty good whiles he was a little boy, because, to be sure, a body don't expec' much off of a little boy. But now that he's growed up, he kreistles me awful, with his high, squeaky voice like a girl's and his finnickiy ways and prancing walk and his nasty fussiness—och!" she ended, disgustedly, "I'd like to slap him good oncet!"

"Yes, ain't? So would I," echoed Addie.

"Say, Addie, our Susie don't seem to take it in that she's rich and independent now and don't have to take it off of Josie so!"

"Well, just you wait—our Susie ain't no fool," said Addie, with unexpected initiative. "She'll soon find it out—and then you watch out!"

"What's botherin' me," said Lizzie with a long breath, "is whether we had ought to tell Susie the truth right aways, or wait till we're on our deathbeds. I'm for tellin' her *now*."

"Yes, well, but it might get out and make talk!"

"Seems to me I don't care no more if it does! I care more for seein' our Susie own her own son!" said Lizzie, rising to a height.

"Poor little Georgie!" sighed Addie, wiping a tear from her cheek. "To have been turned out when he was a baby the way we done!"

"Yes, well, but we give him to his own pop and him well-fixed to take care of him," Lizzie repeated the oft-rehearsed arguments in justification of their years of deception. "Look at what it would have *give*, Addie, to all of us, Susie and Georgie and us all, if we'd have did different to what we done!"

"If we tell now," Addie reminded her, "you know Georgie won't inherit White Oak Farm, if it gets out that he ain't the legal heir."

"But Susie could anyhow inherit all *her* money to him, and that seems better'n an old farm and a house too big and grand for any but a millionaire to live in," argued Lizzie.

"I most have afraid, Lizzie, of how our Susie will take it if we tell her! She might think awful hard of us! I'd most sooner wait till my death-bed before I tell her a'ready."

"But us we might live to such a good old age that her and Georgie would be cheated out of too many more years that they could enjoy each other as mother and son," persisted Lizzie. "No, now that Susie's independent and rich, I think she had ought to be told, Addie."

"All right, Lizzie, if you think."

"We'll go over to-morrow by the trolley and get it over with. For I can't know no more peace till it's settled oncet. It's been botherin' me ever since Joe Houghton died, and I can't stand it no more. And that there Josie's behaviours to-day got me so stirred up! To think of how different a boy our Susie's own son is! We'll go over to-morrow, Addie, and tell her all about it."

"All right if so you think," said Addie.

CHAPTER XVII

SUSAN'S REAPING

SIDNEY'S story, as recited to his son that night, while they sat together in the little living room of the cottage, assumed the colour of a mere college-boy escapade which, far from being to his discredit, rather reflected lustre upon his youthful power to charm and lure the weaker sex. He really became quite enamoured of his tale as he unfolded it; withholding the name of the heroine in the piece for the dramatic climax. For it was to be feared that the moment Georgie knew that name, he would be quite unable to see his father's side with entire fairness. He must hear the whole story with an unprejudiced judgment; the same judgment which a man (unlike sentimental, moralizing women) usually brings to such a case, recognizing the limitations of a man's self-restraint, the hypocrisy of our sham American social purity.

For Georgie, though a cleaner and more guileless youth than his father had been at his age, was yet, in intelligence and understanding, if not in experience, a full-fledged man. He listened from the first with a half smile on his finely cut lips (so like his mother's, Sidney often realized!) as though he were amused and a bit incredulous of the all-conquering Don Juan, or rather Beau Brummel, which his father was making himself out. Surely, thought Georgie, it was the middle-aged conceit and egotism of a man

looking back upon a glorified youth which he saw in high lights and a bit luridly.

"A Pennsylvania Dutch girl she was, from the crudest sort of family—her father a trucker—a Mennonite preacher——"

"What was the attraction for such a swell as you say you were—as you surely *were*," added Georgie, indulgently. "I should think you would always have been too fastidious to have been attracted to a crude, vulgar girl just by her looks; weren't you?"

"She was not vulgar at all herself. She'd had rather different associations from the rest of the family; had been sent away to school and had made friends among a really good class of people who had invited her to their homes now and then—so that she was really quite nice—and very, very charming."

"And haughtily looked down on her poor family, I suppose?"

"Not she! That was the trouble; she could not see that her family made marriage between us out of the question——"

"Did it? Why?" asked Georgie.

"My boy! A Houghton couldn't marry a village school teacher, the daughter of a Mennonite preacher!"

"Couldn't he? That's exactly what Uncle Joe married."

"There's always one black sheep in every family," answered Sidney, colouring very red, to Georgie's surprise. "Joe, even though a Houghton, could not have married a lady!"

"Aunt Susan not a lady?"

"Would she have married your Uncle Joe if she had been?"

"I wonder what ever did make her marry a wretched skinflint like Uncle Joe!" said Georgie,

thoughtfully. "I've often meant to ask her, but never quite got up the nerve."

"To go on with my story," said Sidney, his tone less confident, an actual tremor in his voice, "marriage being out of the question, the inevitable happened. Unfortunately, the girl, not taking proper precautions, a child was born. On the very night of my marriage the girl's father arrived at my house——"

Georgie's hitherto careless attention to this recital changed, at this point, to a keen interest, as he saw how the mere memory of what his father was telling drove the colour from his lips.

"—and dumped down upon me a baby boy, telling me his daughter had died at its birth!

"Of course I did the right thing and provided for the child. I was awfully cut up by the news of the girl's death—I'd cared for her a lot! It spoiled my whole wedding-trip!"

"I should think it might! Why on earth did you do such a thing?—go and ruin a decent girl?"

"But of course, Georgie, such things happen by mutual consent. A man doesn't 'ruin' a woman unless she's awfully willing and perhaps eager to be ruined. Don't fool yourself with any such old-fashioned, sentimental notion!"

"Very well, then, if your attraction for each other was so irresistible, why didn't you get married? Why break the law? Or if our social laws are not founded on nature's laws, then why don't men change the laws? Talk about red anarchy and the upsetting of our established order! What else is that sort of thing?"

"Don't moralize to me, you young whipper-snapper!" growled Sidney, filliping his son's ear. "You'll sow a few wild oats yourself, one of these days, before you settle down."

"But why did you go off and *marry another woman*? Wasn't that a pretty rotten deal for the mother of your child? Weren't you sure the child was yours?"

"Not a doubt of it. I couldn't marry her, though—a Houghton could not marry a——"

Sidney paused significantly, and Georgie spoke up hotly: "A Houghton could seduce a woman, make her a mother, and then go off and marry another woman on the very night his child was born and its mother died! You don't make *me* proud of being a Houghton, Father!"

"For shame, Georgie!" Sidney gravely reproved such disrespect to his blood. "There's something radically wrong with a fellow that has no family pride when he has *reason* to have!"

"What reason have I?"

"The Houghtons were among the earliest settlers of this country, and have, for generations, held influential positions in this country. Has any American any better origin than that?"

"How could you desert that poor girl after you'd been to each other what you say you were?"

"Better ask about the poor baby!" said Sidney, feelingly.

"Well! What about it?"

"To go on with my story—I went with my bride to Europe to take the diplomatic position Uncle George had secured for me—leaving the baby with my mother, who put it with a farmer's family. When, after a year, we came home from Europe, what news do you suppose greeted me? The girl's father came to me and told me that the girl had rallied and got well!—that in order to save her and her parents and sisters from disgrace, and the baby boy from the stigma of illegitimacy, they had told her her baby was dead. Now they wanted me to help them keep

the secret, not only from their little social world, but from the mother of the boy as well.

"I was only too anxious to keep the secret—first, because I cared for the boy's welfare and didn't want him to go through life nameless; second, because—because, Georgie, I wanted my son to inherit White Oak Farm and—and my wife, I had learned, would never bear me a child."

A silence like death filled the little room where they sat. Georgie, like his father, had turned white, his eyes filled with a startled wonder.

Sidney was the first to speak.

"You can imagine what my life was like!—trying to placate my wife's jealousy of the boy; inducing her to tolerate the child in our home and to pass him off as hers——"

He stopped—checked by the pallid, tense look on Georgie's face.

"Then she—was not my mother! And I'm your illegitimate son?"

Sidney nodded.

"And you've tried to teach me to be proud of being a Houghton!"

"You're enough more like a Houghton than Josie is!" said Sidney, heatedly.

"Thank God she was not my own mother!" was the boy's unexpected exclamation. "The way I've suffered all my life at her neglect—her dislike of me! The only balm I've known for that bitterness, Father, has been Aunt Susan's real affection for me. It isn't merely that Aunt Susan is kind to me, she really does care for me a lot! I'm sure I don't know why she does. But when I was a hungry-hearted youngster, the way she'd take me up in her arms and hold me—I knew she *loved* me! It saved my soul! Go on with your story, Father."

"Soon after we moved out here to White Oak

Farm I found to my horror that—your—mother—was actually teaching the school of White Oak Station across the road!—in constant danger of running across you (whom she thought dead, mind you!)—and in danger of meeting my wife, with a possible scene and disclosure! For of course I didn't tell Laura that your mother was alive! She could not have borne it! I tell you I walked on nettles! I——”

“Is my mother living?” Georgie broke in with restrained excitement.

“I'm coming to that.

“I had never told my wife your mother's name and though they had once met for a moment in my college rooms, Laura didn't seem to remember her at all——”

“I must know, Father!” Georgie broke in again. “Is my mother living? Just tell me yes or no!”

“Yes.”

“Go on!”

“I had to get her (your mother) away from this neighbourhood. So I went to her father and told him he'd got to move away; I would finance the move. He was very hard up and though he hated me like hell, he had no choice; he had to accept my offer; for he was as much averse to exposure as I was. But on the very eve of his moving away with his family he died. And then—and then, Georgie——”

“Yes?” urged Georgie, breathlessly.

“And then your mother married.”

“Where is she?” demanded Georgie. “Do you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Can I go to her? For of course I *shall* go to her. Where is she?”

“Georgie, she is a widow, now, and I want to right the wrong I did her—I want to marry her!”

"If she'd be weak enough to marry you now, I'd never own her! Where is she?"

"She is up at the big house, Georgie!"

Georgie sat rigid. Every drop of colour left his face. Again a deathly silence flooded the little room.

This time Georgie was the one to break it, speaking slowly, in a low voice, his eyes piercing his father's.

"She married *your brother!*"

"Yes."

"Your mistress—mother of your bastard!—married your brother!"

"Rough on Joe, of course! But he never knew it."

"*Aunt Susan is my mother!*"

"Yes."

"My mother! She my mother! Father! What you have defrauded me of all my life! What it would have meant to her and to me! Yes, to her, too. Josie, the son whom she knew to be her own, was never so near to her as I've been, even while she didn't know me to be her son, too! And if she had known!"

"Josie's not her son, Georgie!"

"What! Good God, what next? What do you mean?"

"He's her step-son. But of course he doesn't know it and she doesn't want him to know it. He is not to be told, either, of your relation to Susan—you'd lose White Oak Farm."

"You are reckoning without me a bit! I don't want White Oak Farm if I have to get it by repudiating my mother!"

"You won't have to repudiate her. I tell you I'm going to make things right for both you and her!"

"She will never marry you!"

"Why not?"

"Why should she?"

"You think I've got nothing at all to offer her?" demanded Sidney, piqued.

"What have you to offer her?"

"Only myself."

"A Houghton! But I thought a Houghton could not marry a Pennsylvania Dutch Mennonite preacher's daughter!—could not marry his mistress, the mother of his illegal child! Does such a woman get nearer the level of a Houghton when she's a rich widow and the said Houghton is a bankrupt? *She'll* not think so!"

"She will marry me for your sake, Georgie."

"She'll see you damned first, Father! Marry you! Do you suppose I would let her sacrifice herself like that for my sake?"

"Sacrifice herself! I don't see why you'd call it that! Good heavens, boy, if she could stand my brother Joe for seventeen years, she'd certainly find me a pleasant change!"

"You'd be an awful cad to ask her to marry you now that you're down and out and she's on top!—after having cast her off and deserted her and defrauded her of her son! Don't go crawling to her now!"

He suddenly sprang up and stood before his father. "To-morrow morning I am going to her and get her side of this story!"

"Go easy! Remember she doesn't know she's your mother! Break it to her carefully and don't let Josie hear a word of it!"

Georgie, as he turned his back upon his father and left the room, thought, "That such a woman as she is should have had two such bounders in her life as Uncle Joe and Father!—when the best man that ever walked would be unworthy of her! Such a waste of loveliness! Such an absolute waste!"

On Monday morning, Josie, to thwart his mother's project of going to Middleburg to arrange with the family lawyer for settling an income upon her sisters, took the car himself immediately after breakfast to preface her call upon the lawyer with a legal consultation on his own account.

Susan could, of course, have gone by trolley or train, but she was quite satisfied to give Josie rope enough to hang himself—that is, to have him learn directly from their lawyer what were her absolute rights over her inheritance. So she decided to stop at home this morning and go to Middleburg the next day. This afternoon she would go over to Reifsville to leave with Lizzie and Addie the first installment of the income which hereafter should be regularly paid to them by her lawyer.

"How heavenly it is to be able to tell them they need not worry with boarders this summer!" she thought, happily, as she sat in her upstairs sewing room beside a window, darning Josie's socks.

Her step-son's genuine suffering in the situation affected her very little. She had never before found herself callous to any form of distress; but Josie's anguish was so wholly the creation of his own meanness and baseness that she could not feel other than indifferent to it. In fact, she found herself actually hoping that the lawyer would turn the knife in the wound! It would be so salutary for Josie! The very best thing that could happen to him.

It was while she was reflecting thus as she sewed by the window—and with every stitch which she put into Josie's socks thrilling at the bright prospects before her of freedom, travel, a larger life—that Georgie walked in upon her.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came over!" Susan gaily greeted him. "I have such a lot to tell you! Come

here and sit down. Josie's gone to Middleburg on business and we'll have a good hour to ourselves."

"I'm mighty glad he's out of the way! It saves me the necessity of *putting* him out. For this morning I've got to be alone with you—and I'm afraid Josie wouldn't recognize that necessity without the argument of physical force—which I, being theoretically a non-resistant, as you know, would not use unless the necessity were extremely urgent; as it would be to-day."

"Dear me, what a lot of sophomoric words, Georgie! What's it all about?"

Georgie drew a stool to her feet, sat down upon it and folded his arms on her lap.

"Aunt Susan! I want you to talk to me. I want you to begin at the very beginning and tell me your history."

Susan shook her head. "It's too mournfully tragic! Let's talk of something far pleasanter—of the chemical outfit I'm going to get you, and——"

"I said the necessity was urgent, didn't I? Listen! Last night Father told me something of *his* history—an episode of his youth—of his once having been your lover! I want to hear *your* version of that story. I told him I meant to get it from you. I fancy that in a few details, or at least in the point of view, his story and yours may differ a bit!"

Susan was looking at him, now, in astonishment, her face crimson. "What right had your father to tell you this?"

"I'll answer you that when I've heard your story," replied Georgie, taking her hand in his.

"How much did your father tell you, Georgie?"

"Please, please tell me *your* side of it all first—won't you?"

"In my own defence?"

"You could never need any defence to me! It's

that I may know how to judge my father that I want to hear your story."

"I don't like to talk of that hideous blackness of my girlhood, Georgie! I try so hard to forget it all! I'm afraid to begin to speak of it! I get so fearfully stirred up, I can hardly bear it!"

"I hate to put you through it—but I must!—indeed I must!"

Susan laid aside Josie's sock and with Georgie's hand clasped in hers, his young eyes gazing into hers, she spoke.

She told of Sidney's courtship, of their love and happiness; of their betrothal; of their scouring the countryside together in her father's old buggy to purchase, with her savings, the old colonial furniture which they found at out-of-the-way farmhouses; of their keen pleasure in having it done over for their future home, and their temporarily arranging it in the Schrekengusts' parlour; of the beautiful furniture she had bought for Sidney's rooms at college, which was also to be part of their future home; of the visit Sidney's mother had paid to her to try to make her break the engagement; of Sidney's philosophical arguments to urge her to give herself to him before marriage; of her never having dreamed, for an instant, that he was capable of deceiving her, of betraying such infinite trust as had led her to give herself so completely.

Susan's face was white and drawn as she lived over it all again; and Georgie, gazing at her, felt his heart on fire for her, against the man who had wronged her.

She spoke, then, of Sidney's growing coldness and neglect; of her reading in the college paper of his attentions to Miss Laura Beresford, the daughter of the new college president, and an heiress; of her suffering when her letters to him remained un-

answered; of her finally going to him at his college rooms and discovering there that to secure money for his courtship of Miss Beresford he had sold the furniture for which she was still making monthly payments out of her little salary; of her passionate appeal to him to marry her for their coming child's sake; of how she had, then, in her lover's rooms, encountered the woman he soon married; of the birth of her dead baby; of her soul's numbness and deadness through the many long, dreary months that followed; and finally of the circumstances that had driven her into the fatal mistake of marrying Joe.

When she had finished, leaning back in her chair, pale and spent, Georgie sat, for a time, without speaking, his hands clasping hers, his eyes that rested upon her overflowing with tenderness.

"You never doubted that your baby died?" he found voice at last to ask her, his heart beating fast.

"Doubted—that my baby—died?" she dazedly repeated. "What—do you mean, Georgie? Of course she died!"

"*She?* They told you your baby was a girl?"

"Yes! What—*what* is it you know?"

"Your baby was a boy. And my dear, my dear! He didn't die!"

Susan stared at him stupidly. "A boy! It didn't die! You can't mean—that he is alive now!"

She trembled from head to foot. Georgie clasped her two hands to his breast and gazed up into her face without speaking—trying to convey to her, without words, the tremendous truth with which his heart was bursting.

"Where—is—he? Where is my son?" Susan's stiff, dry lips formed the words with difficulty, her whole soul one burning question, as she looked down into Georgie's adoring eyes.

"Mother! Mother!"

For a moment she did not move or speak. Then she drew her hands free, took his face between her palms and looked again, deep and long, into the boy's face so like her own. Her brain was utterly incredulous (it was a wicked plot of Sidney's to gain his way with her!)—but her heart, her blood, cried out with a great longing that this thing should be true—and suddenly something within her knew that it *was* true!

"You are mine—I know you are!"

Her head fell forward on his shoulder, her arms went about him close, she held him to her famished heart as though she would never let him go——

Later, as they still sat together, Georgie said to her, "I shall never forgive Father for his treatment of you! For his having cheated us of each other all these years! He repudiated you—I shall repudiate him!"

"But he loves you. He has always loved you. One can forgive anything to love, Georgie."

"Anything against myself, perhaps. I can't forgive the brutality to you!"

"He loves you," was Susan's answer.

"You're so much larger-minded than I am, Mother!"

"There's little enough love in the world, my darling! We can't afford to spurn or 'repudiate' any drop of it that comes our way."

There was a knock at the door, it opened, and Lizzie and Addie stepped into the room.

At sight of the picture before them, Georgie seated at Susan's feet, their arms about each other, the two women in sombre Mennonite garb stopped short. There was an illumined look in the faces of the mother and son that seemed to mean but one thing.

"Susie!" cried Lizzie, "someone has told you a'ready! Ain't?"

"Told me what?"

"That your baby didn't die for all and that Georgie's him yet! Ain't—you know it a'ready?"

"Have you and Addie always known this?"

"Och, yes, Susie, us we knowed it ever since it *was* a'ready!"

"There is *no* doubt of it then?"

"Och, no—though I know you never suspicioned it, and to be sure, it must seem awful funny to you! Och, yes, it's true, all right, Susie. Me and Addie, us we come over this morning to tell you all about it and get it off our consciences oncet! How did Georgie find it out?"

"His father told him!"

Georgie sprang up and hugged and kissed them both. "I've got two jolly aunts as well as a Long-Lost Mother! Mother! Mother! I want to say it all day long!" he cried, going back to her side and again throwing his arms about her.

"Here!" exclaimed a high, rasping voice at the threshold of the room; and they all turned, startled, to see Josie standing there menacingly, his face flushed with resentment. "I'd thank you to quit that, Georgie Houghton!"

"Quit what?"

"Calling my mother *Mother*! That name is sacred to *me*, I'd have you know, Georgie Houghton! I don't care to have any other fellow using it to her!" cried Josie with a grotesque mingling of hauteur and sentimentality in his high, effeminate voice. "What *right* have you to call her *Mother*?"

Georgie rose and went to Josie's side. "I call her Mother, Josie," he said, gravely, almost solemnly, "because she *is* my mother!"

It was characteristic of him that he did not add,

"And she is not yours!"—as Josie in his place would surely have done.

"She's not and you shan't call her so!" snapped Josie.

"Yes, she is, too, his mother, Josie!" spoke in Lizzie, "and wery glad you will be to hear it, fur now you'll inherit this here *es*-tate, for all you won't get our Susie's fortune."

"What on earth are you talking about?" faltered Josie, utterly bewildered.

"Come here, Josie, dear," said Susan, gently, "and let me explain it to you——"

"Let me spare you that ordeal, Mother," Georgie interposed. "Let me tell him. You have——"

"Tell me what?" demanded Josie, looking frightened.

"Josie, my father's wife was not my mother. *Your* father's wife is my mother."

"How could she be? Are you crazy? What do you mean by saying such a thing? It's not true! It couldn't be!"

"Yes, it could be, too, Josie!" Lizzie contradicted him. "Our Susie had Georgie single-wise."

"How dare you insult my mother like that?" cried Josie, choking with indignation. "As if my father would have married a woman like that! As if——"

"But, Josie," Susan interposed calmly, "it is true. I am Georgie's mother."

Josie stared at her wildly. "But—but he is younger than I am!"

"Josie, dear, I never meant to tell you—but—I am your step-mother."

Josie stood stock still, his face slowly going very white. Susan, with a movement of deep pity for the blow she was dealing him, took an impulsive step toward him, her hands outstretched.

But he stepped out of her reach and his lips curving to a sneer, he turned deliberately upon Georgie.

"You—bastard!" he hurled at his cousin.

"Josie, my boy!" pleaded Susan. But he wheeled about and turned upon her.

"You—hussy!" he cried out.

There was an instant's silence in the room. Then Georgie spoke very quietly: "It will always be a comfort to you to know, Josie, that the woman to whom you have used that epithet is *not* your mother, though she has cared for you as a mother all your life!"

"You shut up! And get out of my house! *All* of you get out of my house!" he exclaimed, hysterically, quite beside himself, scarcely knowing what he was saying. "This is my house! Clear out of it, every one of you! I never want to lay eyes on any one of you again as long as I live! I——"

Susan saw that he was suffering torture; that the shock of what he had just learned had wounded him terribly; wounded his pride, his love for her, his faith in her, the foundation principles of his life.

Her heart yearned over him. "Leave me alone with him—all of you," she said. "I want to talk with him."

"You will never talk with me again!" he almost screamed, shaking off her hand upon his arm. "Leave my house! You shall not stay here another hour! Go with your bastard——"

"Here! You——" cried Georgie in a sudden rage, drawing back his arm—but Susan sprang between them.

"We will all go," she said, quietly.

Living alone with her son in his college town, sharing his life very completely and at the same time living her own life in freedom, Susan now, for the

first time since her girlhood, knew genuine contentment, even great happiness. Their companionship seemed so completely to satisfy them both, it so filled Susan's heart after all the starved years behind her, that she dreaded almost with terror the inevitable hour when Georgie would fall in love and she would lose the best of him.

The only cloud upon her peace was her alienation from Josie. He had too long been the chief concern of her life for her to be able, now, to cast off all thought of him, all responsibility for his welfare and happiness. Because she knew he must be suffering, must be missing her, longing for her, she yearned over him, even while fully realizing how very salutary for him was this experience through which he was living.

She wrote to him once, with all the affection and motherliness she could command. He sent her letter back unopened.

The years of care and devotion she had given to him seemed all to have been for nothing!

On the day when Georgie, taking her in his arms, confided to her that the girl he loved had promised to marry him, Susan fought off her overwhelming sense of loss and desolation by sobbing on his heart, "Well, anyway, I shall have some grandchildren to mother!"

She dreamed of the day when Josie, too, would permit her to "mother" his children; for her wistful hope that he would some day discover his need of her to be greater than his resentment was the only thing which sustained her in the belief that the long sacrifice of her life had not been utterly without fruit.



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